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Barry E. Krakovsky

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A RE-TRACING IN PRAISE OF THE UN-RETRACEABLE:  
JAZZ IMPROVISATION, THEATRE GAMES AND CURRICULUM

by

BARRY KRAKOVSKY

(Under the Direction of John Weaver)

ABSTRACT

This work is an attempt to analyze some of the conditions and activities that surround improvisation. I will argue that the process of improvisation and even the attempt at improvisation can offer the curriculum scholar an important pedagogical model. Importantly, this model will offer no direct solutions which might improve one's pedagogical stance. Instead, these models are best interpreted as a provocation, or an invitation to think of a better relationship, for example, of teacher and student. I interrogate jazz improvisation, theatrical improvisation, and popular culture. I also examine a version of performativity that could provide a degree of agency to those who wish to challenge the status quo or the taken for granted.

INDEX WORDS: improvisation, performativity, theatre games, jazz, education,  
curriculum

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JAZZ IMPROVISATION, THEATRE GAMES AND CURRICULUM

by

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A Dissertation Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of Georgia Southern University in

Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree

DOCTOR OF EDUCATION

STATESBORO, GEORGIA

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JAZZ IMPROVISATION, THEATRE GAMES AND CURRICULUM

by

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Electronic Version Approved:  
Fall 2015

## DEDICATION

To my parents, Saul Krakovsky and Phyllis Zaretsky...sorry it took me so long.

And to my daughters, Andrea and Arianna Krakovsky...sorry it took me away from you.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I took a long and somewhat circuitous route to this dissertation. I can regret the length of time it took, although I cannot change the fact that it took as long as it did. I would like to thank my partner in so many things, Teresa Ferguson, for it was she who had the idea to return to school. And it was she who provided an academic companionship that made this journey much easier. I would also like to thank the members of my committee, Dr. Peter Appelbaum, Dr. Dan Chapman, Dr. Marla Morris, and Dr. John Weaver for their guidance, good suggestions, and their willingness to spend a significant amount of their time helping me shape and rethink my work. I would be remiss if I didn't mention the field of curriculum studies and the graduate program at Georgia Southern University, since both were invaluable in my transformation from someone who is prone to wandering into a teacher who became a more disciplined wanderer. Lastly, I would like to extend my heartfelt thanks to Dr. John Weaver. He started out as one of my professors, yet in true Derridean fashion, extended his scholarly advice, hospitality and friendship: Thank you John.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
DEDICATION.....	5
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	6
CHAPTER	
1 INTRODUCTION.....	8
2 I PLAY THEREFORE I AM.....	37
3 IMPROVISATION AND THE DESIRE FOR THE IMPOSSIBLE.....	60
4 “YOU SHOULDN’T NEED A WEATHERMAN TO KNOW WHICH WAY THE WIND BLOWS: POPULAR CULTURE AND IMPROVISATION.....	87
5 PLAYWRITING AS SOLO IMPROVISATION: AN ORIGINAL PLAY....	124
6 IMPROVISATION, INSTITUTIONS AND STANDARDS.....	155
7 BEYOND PERFORMATIVITY AND A COOKBOOK CURRICULUM ....	185
8 CODA AS CURRICULUM.....	213
REFERENCES.....	219



“...If I knew where good songs came from, I’d go there more often...” (Cohen, Burger, 2014, p. 251).

## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

In John Dewey’s landmark work, *Art As Experience*, (2005) he successfully makes the case for the importance of the arts in human development. Dewey deftly describes the impact and necessity of art, in its broadest sense, when he writes, “...works of art are the only media of complete and unhindered communication between man and man that can occur in a world full of gulfs and walls that limit community of experience” (p. 109). This transformational impact is felt by the creator of art and the person who participates in this esthetic experience as an observer, however, what is problematic is that these observations lean more towards the observer as spectator instead of the more fruitful role of participant and equal. The philosopher Jacques Rancière (2009) in his book, *The Emancipated Spectator*, challenged me to reconsider my definition of the term spectator while he also calls for a new way of conceiving of the relationship between audience and performance. With regards to the spectator, and audiences in general, Rancière challenges us to re-think our positions as he proposes one of his central themes: “equality of intelligence.” Indeed, he writes,

Being a spectator is not some passive condition that we should transform into activity. It is our normal situation. We also learn and teach, act and know, as spectators who all the time link what we see to what we have seen and said, done and dreamed. There is no more a privileged form than there is a privileged starting point. Everywhere there are starting points, intersections and junctions that enable us to learn something new if we refuse, firstly, radical distance,

secondly the distribution of roles, and thirdly the boundaries between territories.

(p. 17)

In this work I wrestle with the relationship between spectator and performer since it serves as a way for me to examine similar relationships, such as teacher and students. Rancière's remarks regarding "distance," "roles," and "boundaries" in some ways bolsters one of the themes- a refutation of administration from the top down- I propose in my original play in chapter 5. But since I am also interested in the artist and her relationship to her audience, I also look to John Dewey (2005). As Dewey analyzes the various artists as they create and perfect their work he perhaps, unintentionally, promotes a method of creation and re-creation that is decidedly linear in its approach. "Writer, composer of music, sculptor, or painter can retrace, during the process of production, what they have previously done. When it is not satisfactory in the undergoing or perceptual phase of experience, they can to some degree start afresh. This retracing is not readily accomplished in the case of architecture-which is perhaps one reason why there are so many ugly buildings..." (p. 53), Dewey writes to describe the process of creative production: linear, re-imagined, and revised. I do not wish to denigrate this method of artistic production. I do not wish to malign the way so many people work as they attempt to create something of value and beauty. Indeed, the seemingly solitary act of creation and revision is vital to the continued growth and development of the arts and by association the development of humankind. And, in what will eventually become clear as ironic and perhaps hypocritical, it is the way in which the work you see in front of you is being created. And yet it is not the only way to work. My mention of Dewey in this introduction is not meant to foreground his philosophy as emblematic of my own, nor is it

meant to be central to an understanding of the words that follow. To be sure a discussion that is in many ways an arts based inquiry must mention Dewey (1960, 2001, 2005). But my interests are non-linear and for that I must turn to Derrida (1982, 1997) in his words and J. Hillis Miller's words (2007, 2009). Indeed, so much of Derrida's task of "deconstruction" seems to mirror that of the jazz and theatrical improviser, not in their products, per se, but rather in the tensionalities that comprise the improvisational process, which paradoxically could never be a process. Perhaps this is why Walter Benjamin appears in the preface to Miller's (2009) book, *For Derrida*. Briefly yet brilliantly, Benjamin says, "*Method ist Umweg* [Method is detour]" (p. xv). Improvisation and "deconstruction" in all their complexity embody risk as they search for the school to come, justice to come, democracy to come, or something wonderful to come, for example, as one (individual or informal collective) responds to a "wholly other." In remarking on a lifetime of friendship and scholarship with Derrida, Miller (2009) writes, "...It is a wager that his works will continue to function in the future, but in ways that are impossible to predict, except that he can be sure that they are perhaps destined to *errance*, to erring and to wandering..." (p. 47). Non-linear methods of creation and iteration, like improvisation, tend to be pushed to the margins for reasons that are argued as practical as well as pedagogical. A performative culture which praises top down control, and a strict production quota hasn't the time to allow people to "wander." I would like to change this arrangement. I do not desire, nor am I arguing, to replace the linear process of creation, revision and recreation and its variants. Instead, I would like to see improvisation de-marginalized. I would like to give it a seat at the academic table alongside those who create in the more accepted fashion. Charlie Parker deserves to sit next to Igor

Stravinsky; Jonathan Winters deserves the same recognition as James Thurber, since all of those mentioned created works of value, intelligence, and beauty, despite their different methods of creation. And to continue with a Derridean thought and my metaphor of the dinner table, I would suggest that the table in question reserve an empty seat for the guest to come. Miller reminded me of the importance of the guest to come in his discussion of Derrida within the context of the Jewish tradition to leave a seat for Elijah (p. 47). I write these words in full awareness of the paradox of my situation. I write these words with the full knowledge of the irony I demonstrate as I propose privileging the improviser (always a collaborative activity?) alongside the solitary artist of careful vision and re-vision, while employing the seemingly linear method *of* the solitary writer, looking back on what I've written and looking ahead at what still needs to be done. The solitary artist who struggles to innovate is important to creation but so is the one who works in collaboration(?) with others, or the Other *within* the individual self, attempting to create something new, something wonderful right away, or at the very least, the seed(s) of something wonderful. My desires do not come lightly or without careful thought. For almost three decades I have worked as a teacher in a variety of public schools, with students of different ages, interests, talents and academic abilities. I'm proud of what I do, although I acknowledge my mistakes. I am mindful of what needs to be done. This mindfulness has been informed and transformed by largely traditional education (my undergraduate and graduate degrees in history have proven invaluable to me), instinct, intuition, reflection, a Reform Jewish upbringing, and for the past several years, my immersion into the world of curriculum studies. Although I always suspected something was wrong with so much of public education I was unaware of the

specificities: patriarchy, heteronormativity, unregulated capitalism, literalism, racism, xenophobia, American exceptionalism, commodified play, violence, performativity, and ironically, scientific illiteracy has all found its way into the hidden and public curriculum. Indeed, given the current situation it would be easy and understandable to retreat into despair. To retreat into one's nest surrounded by the totems and comforts of the bourgeoisie. I've done that. At one point in my life I was the married father of two. I was part of a two income family that was able to afford a nice home in a relatively upscale middle-class community: swimming pool, tennis courts, and yard of the month. I was Charles Babbitt (1922), incapable of self-reflection and un-willing to try to find a way out and as such did not feel the need to start anything that might approach self-realization. Babbitt was Sinclair Lewis' scathing critique of what man had become by the early twentieth century. Lewis' fictive Babbitt was his aesthetic response to the deleterious effects of unregulated industrialization on humankind. In this sense Lewis' critique coincides with that of Marx and the Frankfurt School. Was I the product of a society that encourages alienation from one another? Was I complicit as an educator, delivering a product that seems to nurture passivity toward those things that should matter in exchange for a comfortable couch and a large screen television? Those questions didn't seem to matter to me because when things seemed especially unfulfilling for reasons that I wouldn't fathom, I could always medicate myself with weed, alcohol, and sports, reveling in the ,“thrill of victory and the agony of defeat.” It was therefore fortunate for me that for most of my life I not only possessed a sense of humor, but the ability to make other people laugh, because I was able to exploit this “talent” when I enrolled in a class in “comedy improv” in 1988, which coincidentally was the second year of my teaching

career in the Georgia public school system. It was also about the time I discovered jazz music. Although I didn't know it then, my experience as a student and eventual performer in improvisational comedy, and my eventual immersion into live and recorded jazz music, would open me up to a new way of being in the classroom and interacting with my students.

For now, I would like to situate myself as a “White Jewish male” and examine when, and perhaps why, jazz music, ostensibly a Black aesthetic, resonated with me. I was a White, twenty something Jewish male, from Long Island, now living and teaching in a predominantly Christian part of the South, in McDonough, Georgia. As it happened, one day as I was driving and listening to music on the radio (and switching between the stations of Georgia State and Georgia Tech), I chanced upon a jazz piece that surprisingly, impacted me to the point where I couldn't drive and listen at the same time. So, I pulled over. When the DJ finally got around to naming the five or so songs in that set I learned that the music that essentially “blew me away” was made by John Coltrane and his quartet playing Irving Berlin's “Russian Lullaby” from an album entitled *Soultrane* (1958), which was coincidentally released the year of my birth. Up to that point my musical menu consisted mostly of rock and pop music, and some classical music, some of which I was forced to attempt to play during that time in my youth when I took (although not by choice) piano lessons. My father only listened to sports on the radio and Muzak. He claimed the “elevator music” calmed him down. It did not. Occasionally my father listened in our home to *klezmer*, the music of eastern European Jews, especially the songs with a singer, since the lyrics were in Yiddish and he loved to sing along. Although my father was born in the Bronx, NYC, his parents, Russian Jewish immigrants

who arrived in 1920, spoke Yiddish in the home. Even as an adult he was fluent in this language that inexplicably made him happy and sad simultaneously. And since my father and I rarely spoke about *anything* at any length, I never found out why he had that reaction to *klezmer* music, although I have my suspicions. My mother loved Broadway Musicals and took me to as many musicals as she could (when they had Wednesday matinees) in Manhattan during most of the 1970's. To be sure there is something of a commonality between "show tunes," and jazz for example, and yet I would argue in retrospect that they contained enough diverse musical genres to perhaps make me more willing to listen to different types of music. Coltrane's version of Berlin's *Russian Lullaby* sounded somewhat familiar to me yet also different. Berlin, a Russian born Jew, must have absorbed elements of *klezmer* music and these elements can be heard in some of his tunes, like *Russian Lullaby*. This was the familiar part of the song. But the way Coltrane transformed that song, in the improvised choruses and in the statement and re-statement of the melody, was brilliant. It's difficult to really know why this music had such an emotional impact. What can be said is that song by Berlin and Coltrane, and his quartet, began my informal exploration of jazz music (and a possible re-birth) and my obsession with record collecting. It is purely coincidental that my teaching career in Georgia, introduction to improvisational theatre, and immersion into jazz happened at roughly the same time. But in retrospect, improvisational theatre, jazz, teaching, and eventually curriculum studies would all impact the way I approach knowledge and being in the classroom.

Before I discuss the efficacy of a pedagogy which comes from the teacher who is willing to step out from behind the lectern, to remove the cloak of expert, *to be aware of*

*the gap and use the gap* between teacher and students, and take that leap *with* them in pursuit of a real education, to improvise with them, to seek out surprise, I would like to offer some examples of what improvisation is and is not: Although it can be and is often used as such, improvisation is not a “fun way” to learn and remember the material. It’s not a method to improve one’s grades, or make lawyers better able to argue a case in court (at one point as an improviser me and my improvisational partners were employed by a group of lawyers as part of their mock trials. My friends and I portrayed a variety of witnesses, all to help hone the skill of the lawyer to think on his feet, before the case went to trial). It’s not a way to give one an edge in the business world by improving one’s ability to innovate. And it’s not an easy path to creation or the lazy man’s approach to composition. While it is true that improvisation can be those things and for many people this is enough, I would argue that we should hold out for improvisation’s greater possibility(s). We should adopt Jacques Derrida’s pronouncement (1982) that improvisation is an impossibility. His reasoning isn’t meant to sound defeatist. Instead, as I discuss in chapter 3, Derrida is opposed to the possibility of improvisation because by accepting it as part of the possible one limits its achievements. One reduces improvisation to just another tool to use in the pursuit of a pre-determined goal. When this happens any chance at a dialogical encounter suggested by William Pinar (1994) is removed, and the rupture of something new being created, whether it be the justice Derrida sought in the law or the democracy to come; a new form of art, like cubism, a new scientific theory, like relativity, or a new way of shaking up the academic canon suggested by Pinar when he writes, “...The possibility is staggering. What is possible is a genuinely experimental field which sees itself as deliberately abandoning present



understandings, unearthing material of which we have been unconsciousness...” (p. 122) will be locked away under the cloak and “safety” of a conservative approach that limits access to information, prevents the unexpected; all the while it nurtures a passive student.

For me and many who study curriculum, William Pinar’s work looms large. For example, in *Autobiography, Politics and Sexuality: Essays in Curriculum Theory 1972-1992* (1994), he provides inspiration regarding the “process of education” (p. 120), while promoting the necessity and willingness to take risks (p. 122), and the need to learn from the tension between theory and practice (p. 123). Indeed, regarding the relationship between theory and practice Pinar reminds us that, “...It is a call for authentic investigation of experience, in which our theoretical expositions are dialectically linked with that of experience...” (p. 123). I find a striking similarity between the tensionality of theory and practice in the field of curriculum, with the tensionality between technique and musicality I discuss later as described by curriculum scholar and musician Marla Morris (2009). Morris makes the important point that, “...technique is part of the musicality not separated from it...” (p. 76). Given Morris’ and Pinar’s insights a strong case could be made for the requirements in theatre and music education never to separate technique from theatricality and musicality respectively. Pinar (1994) also looms large because he calls us to be attentive to the idiosyncratic moment when he writes:

What is special, what is unrepeatable, potentially interesting and on occasion revelatory, is the moment by moment experience of particular individuals in particular room [sic] at particular times. There are always issues to be addressed, often not conscious for either students or teachers, which the aware teacher can

help identify, and make use of in order to ground whatever the planned lesson is in the actual and immediate experience of everyone in the room (p. 126).

Although Pinar is far more articulate than I regarding the importance of that idiosyncratic moment, in retrospect I had an inkling of its importance when my life was starting to fill with and focus on teaching in the classroom, improvisational comedy and jazz. I also find it interesting that as I explored the field of curriculum my writings organically gravitated toward an understanding of those nascent moments of creation within an aesthetic context, when creativity erupts and is pursued. My work attempts to examine those moments that are unplanned yet as Pinar says, “revelatory.”

As I hope to demonstrate with the words I have written, at its admittedly utopian best, improvisation is about future realization(s) and connection(s). It is about moving beyond the difficulty of recognizing the individual self and the potential for transformation that can occur when that self is seen as part of the collective Self (Sarath, 2013). For Dewey, the arts was a way for him to let us know that if we participated in that aesthetic experience, in the manner in which he describes, it would be possible for us to connect our individual experiences with the larger community of experience. As I’ve already mentioned, I am not critiquing Dewey’s compositional approach, nor the artists he finds so praiseworthy to the arts. Instead, I wish to offer another option for realization of the individual self and the possibility of transcendence that can occur with connection to the collective Self. As a classroom teacher and student of curriculum, I am interested in what we are creating together as we improvise our way through, playing with time, being out of time, in that nascent moment of creation through its “final?” form, not to rest on our laurels, nor to revel in the alleged magic of improvisational creation, but rather to

demystify those moments of improvisational creation. I want to be able to be part of the moment yet retain the ability to step outside, if only briefly, so as to observe, reflect, critique, and possibly improve that moment. But, for those who might expect a technique, or a series of methods to be employed in the classroom (seven ways to use improvisation in the classroom might appeal to teachers, administrators and publishers but I'll never do it), as a guaranteed way to ensure student success, as defined by mandated standards, I'm afraid the words I write will prove to be a disappointment. The attentive teacher instinctively knows the folly of considering a surefire methodology that claims to produce good teaching, as do the many Curriculum scholars I have read, such as William Pinar (1994, 2006), Ted Aoki (2005), Cleo H. Cherryholmes (1988), William Ayers (2004), Peter Appelbaum (2006, 2012, 2013), Marla Morris (2009) and Henry Giroux (1983), for example, who seek a way out of the taken for granted; who seek transformative experiences.

I would like to offer another personal recollection in the hopes of explaining myself better. About seventeen years ago from when I write these words, I was asked by the social studies coordinator of our county to come up with a presentation for an upcoming workshop for social studies teachers. She was aware of my teaching and had heard of my experience as an improvisational performer. Although I normally shy away from those things I agreed. My presentation consisted of several improvisational "games" that had been used as a vehicle for comedy which were now modified to help the student remember, understand, and analyze some important historical themes and develop historical thinking skills. I introduced, for example, a game known as "expert panel." In this game there is a host and a panel of three experts. I played the host, and three teachers

at the workshop volunteered to be the experts on the panel. Typically, the host asks the audience to suggest a topic for the experts to discuss and if this game were being played in an improvisational comedic performance comedy would hopefully ensue. Since the majority of the people at the workshop were honors and advanced placement U.S. History teachers, the topic suggested was the gilded age and the experts were three well-known figures from that time period: Andrew Carnegie, Cornelius Vanderbilt, and J.P. Morgan. This configuration seemingly had little chance at creating comedy, which was fine since the goal was to give the teachers a novel way to help the students understand the significant themes, and historical skills, of the gilded age. My job as host was to field questions from the audience and in time they caught on to the structure and content of improvised questions and answers. They also came to realize that they might have a turn “on stage” when the next game is played. The novel approach of interacting with and presenting the material (and interacting with one another) combined with the nervousness that comes when someone is outside of their comfort zone, (people fear performing and public speaking, for example) produced laughter from the audience and participants on the panel. I find it fascinating that teachers with years of experience in the classroom fear public speaking, despite having spoken to and allegedly with their students for years. How limited must be their discussions for them to fear public speaking and performing so strongly?! Predictably, some of the participants tried to show off with either their knowledge of the material or their ability to make what was for them a joke. When the workshop was over I learned that the participants enjoyed my workshop and they claimed that they would play some of the improv games in their classrooms. I want to talk about what they enjoyed and why they enjoyed it. I would first argue they enjoyed what was for

them a novel approach to the teaching of what has become for many a boring time period of U.S. history, the gilded age. I would also argue that they enjoyed stepping out of their usual persona as teacher (*but not of expert*) as they pretended to be one of the robber barons from the gilded age. Interestingly, their nervousness made them inclined to hide behind the laughter being produced, that in turn produced more laughter, although it was a laughing at rather than a laughing with, but more on that later. What could have been a serious and informational exercise became constrained by the laughter. However, when I spoke with the teachers who played the game or those who watched it, it became clear that they saw the laughter as one of the highlights of the game. For them it was the proof they needed to try the game in their classroom. Their reasoning was that if the teacher can help the students have fun and learn something then it was a win-win situation for everyone. Now don't get me wrong. I'm not against laughter in the classroom unless it's being used to bolster the powerful at the expense of the weak, obscure information or prevent interrogation that could potentially change what we know about a given subject. In other words, the game they played was useful to them because it was a fun way for both students and teacher to learn an immutable body of information, not a potential vehicle for iteration and innovation. In their nervousness and thinking they had to *perform*, they hid behind the masks of funny accents and gestures. Interestingly, when given the opportunity to unveil they found another way to conceal. They avoided risk, retreated from the *funktionslust* (the joy of doing), avoided the difficult, did not notice the ambiguity, avoided the chaos, presenting instead, a false and limited joy cloaked in superficial humor. In her book, *On Not Being Able to Play: Scholars, Musicians and the Crisis of Psyche*, (2009) curriculum scholar and musician, Marla Morris, describes an

honest and more complete joy as she contrasts the times she could with the times she couldn't play music. Indeed, Morris writes,

There is playing and then there is practicing. When I am able to play, I wouldn't call it practicing. I play. I do not separate out the practice from the play as I did when I was studying as a classical pianist. My practicing days are clearly over. I just play and that is a totally different thing from practicing. I do not do grueling repetitions, I do not play slowly for an hour, I don't care what my fingering is and I don't care if I get it right. After two injuries, I play. Playing means technique is part of the musicality not separated from it (p. 76).

Those of us in the classroom trying to find a way to be with the students and *for the students* can learn a lot from musicians, especially those who also happen to be engaged in the type of scholarly work that demands an unflinching honesty and the willingness and capability to reflect. Indeed, Morris' observation regarding the relationship between technique and musicality (or in the case of theatre, technique and theatricality) is seen and often repeated in the reflections of jazz musicians and theatre game players that comprise much of this study. Their observations partially serve to validate my study of aesthetics as a way out of our performative culture.

Unfortunately, the grasp of that performative culture is strong. This is why the teachers in the audience and the panel tried to make jokes. Jokes can be useful but only when they speak truth to power, when they disrupt, when they challenge the status quo, when they point out contradictions, and when they inspire others to dig deep to reveal the truth, albeit truth with a small (t). That day in Griffin, Georgia, I saw the misuse and misunderstanding of improvisation. And I saw no real disruption to the status quo.

Instead, what I saw and participated in was the continuation of a conservative approach to education. This is education that is controlled from the top down- process and product. It is education that is tainted by the control of a largely damaging, centralized, yet at times inept, authority. The novelty of the improv games and humor produced only superficial changes to a conservative pedagogy: a pedagogy that controls teachers and students by limiting access to information, and managing students and teachers. It is a pedagogy which insists upon over testing the students, over evaluating the teachers through a complex, unintelligible, inaccurate method of observation, all while maintaining the claim of accountability for students and teachers, and the proclamations of a job well done.

We teach in a real and metaphorical toxic environment. The industrial and postindustrial age, and our response to these ages, has robbed us of the joy we once had *in doing*, what I talk about later as *funktionslust*, and replaced it with the production requirement of being done. The pressures of production have of necessity impacted the approach people take to work of all sorts and as a result academics have suffered. The students in my advanced placement class in United States history are advertised by the College Board as the cream of the intellectual crop, and yet, they typically shy away from the difficult, viewing it only as an obstacle instead of a source for inspiration. They are reluctant to embrace complexity, especially if it entails what for them is an inherent contradiction, such as a historical writing prompt that contains the requirements of precision and ambiguity. In a sense, the current system of top down education, which utilizes what Freire (2000) has described as the banking model, discourages students to take risks and play with ideas, especially those which are complex and ambiguous. My

student's reluctance to embrace apparent contradictions is symptomatic of a series of larger problems: tradition is either revered or reviled but never both; emotion, passion, and desire are viewed as incompatible with rational thought, and tensionalities between two positions are avoided as no one apparently wishes to dwell in the in-between.

Ambiguities are to be shunned, not mediated, as they should be. We in the public schools need to revise our non-aporetic stance regarding what we know, what needs to be known, and the way(s) in which we attempt to get there and if Peter Appelbaum (2012, 2013) and Jacques Rancière (2009) are right intellectuals who wrestle with curriculum studies and the arts respectively, need to reevaluate what they do, that is to say *their pedagogical stance* lest they recreate the very thing they are attempting to fix. This is not to say what we know is completely wrong. It's not. Instead, I am suggesting that we need to nurture what I talk about later as "relational intelligence." To know ourselves and others, and to empathize with and understand the Other. This is why I fight for improvisation in the way that Derrida (1982) perceives it. We can be capable of the simultaneous skills of being fully enmeshed with the moment yet still retain the capacity to be critical of that moment. We can shed light on the invisible to make it more visible. We can embrace and occasionally conquer the difficult as did Einstein as is revealed in Arthur Miller's book, *Einstein Picasso: Space, Time, And The Beauty That Causes Havoc*, (2001) and perhaps exclaim like Einstein did when he stated, "...It is a wonderful feeling to recognize the unity of complex phenomena which appear to direct sense observation as totally separate things" (p. 71). I've experienced those improvisations in the classroom and on the stage. I've experienced the joy that comes from being part of an ensemble, whether that ensemble is a group performing on a stage, or a class of students



and their teacher, navigating their way through a subject that must remain difficult. I have come out from behind my lectern, removing the appointed label of “expert.” While it is true that I know more history and about the study of history than my students, it would be misleading of me to pretend to be anything but a participant in a journey that from the beginning has always been theirs to take. This is why I agree with William Ayers (2004) when he states that, “...Our first commitment, then, is this: to recognize and call out the humanity in each of our students. We become students of our students. We take their side” (p. 66). Thus, when I speak of improvisation in the classroom I do so not to replace the more widespread method of creation, revision, and re-creation. It works and will continue to work. I simply offer this: real improvisation in the classroom, not the games previously discussed, has the potential to serve the students by giving them experience in and the expectation of insight that comes from the doing, and possibly, an understanding of the past, present, and an abstract of a better future to come. It is my hope that my work differentiates itself from the work of others because of the worlds I have inhabited and the boundaries that I have crossed. At its best and perhaps most simplest, improvisation has always entailed a type of disciplined wandering. The trick is, of course, not allowing the tensionality between the two positions, discipline and wandering, to become so overwhelming that one either quits or succumbs to the pull of one at the expense of the other. As you will see in the study which follows, that goal can be somewhat elusive if not impossible.

## CHAPTER 2

### i PLAY THEREFORE I AM: POCKETS OF PROTEST

In chapter 2 I talk about jazz and improvisational theatre as a potential model for a way out from the moribund, the taken for granted, from the usual *ho-hum* that passes

for education today. I examine the impact that true improvisation has on jazz music and theatrical performances. Some, like Curriculum scholar Ted Aoki (2005) have found in jazz a possible way out of the morass, which of course served to validate my initial instinct that there was something there. I incorporate the writings of jazz musicians (Bailey, 1993), and some, like Nat Hentoff (1976) who write about jazz, calling it the “sound of surprise” (p. 25). In my research I found a consistent search for surprise by the musicians or, in the case of musician Pee Wee Russell, surprise after the fact, for example when a student musician transcribed an improvised performance of Russell’s showing him the written musical transcript of the previous night’s improvisational performance. I expand on the potential of improvisation to improve a previously written piece by comparing a musician’s take on the power of jazz improvisation to imbue a standard song with something new, with that of comedian Lenny Bruce’s take on how his written material is improved when he improvises. The conclusions are the same for musicians and comedian: in each case they remarked, in retrospect, that when they performed something old it was changed by the inclusion of improvisation, even if the time spent improvising was minimal. I write about the disruptive power of jazz in a way that suggests a power distribution from the bottom up rather than the top down. I also write about jazz music’s ability to foreshadow a political future to come (Attali, 1999). French economist and jazz aficionado Jacques Attali, seems to expand upon the cultural connection discussed by me of the Frankfurt school in his arguments regarding the music’s ability to serve as an abstract for a new social order. And, lastly in this chapter, I talk about play in its broadest sense. I connect an older, non-commodified conception of play by Friedrich Schiller, (2004) because his insight on play for our current generation

can make us better use play for what many would agree are serious purposes: I will argue that the origins of spontaneity, crucial to improvisation, is found in play, not before play, and I anticipate a fundamental epistemological debate regarding spontaneity: Is it constructed or immanent to the situation? When jazz musicians perform they play, when theatrical improvisers perform (and rehearse) they play, and when teachers and students interact in the classroom they should play. They should do this to expand rather than conserve; they should do this to disrupt, rather than maintain.

### CHAPTER 3 IMPROVISATION AND THE DESIRE FOR THE IMPOSSIBLE

This chapter is fascinating and frustrating. A lack of consensus among those who write on creativity, spontaneity, autonomy, and originality, within jazz and theatrical improvisation, has compelled me to consider the merits of their disparate arguments, and to dwell in ambiguity and inconclusiveness. This situation exists because there seems to be no definitive situation that will produce that improvisational moment. For example, when interpreting the influence of constraints on creativity, writers like Nachmanovitch (1990) view them as crucial to igniting the “essential surprises” (p. 86) which constitutes a creative moment or moments. In contrast, other constraints, like racist infused popular culture prove impossible to surmount as seen for example in the work of Amy Seham (2001) who writes about improvisational theatre. Indeed, instead of creating a spark that might ignite a creative surprise the large majority of improv players Seham describes succumb to a group mind infected with an assortment of social ills. And adding insight while complexifying the discussion is Jacques Rancière (2009), because his work forced me to reconsider what I assumed about the performer and audience, both literally and figuratively. Moreover, I discover another obstacle as jazz musicians fight to improvise

within the time constraints of thirty two bars. Why do some musicians fall prey to time constraints and offer up recycled clichés, while others use the same constraints of time as moments of inspiration? I found some explanations within sports analyses (Gumbrecht, 2006) and in the work of Ekkehard Jost (1994), a professor of musicology and a musician at the University of Giessen, as they describe a similar type of muscle memory shared by athlete and musician. Indeed, Jost writes about a musician who, “will fall back on ideas he has worked out at one time... he plays what ‘live under his fingers’” (p. 137). A similar kind of memory seems to exist in our conversations. Today, for example, far too many people are satisfied with the exclamation, “It is what it is!” What they actually mean to say is, “I give up. I have no thought, original or otherwise that might shed some light on your situation. I lack the information to place your problem in historical context and I lack the empathy to care about your situation in the first place.” I describe how the process of improvisation is negatively impacted by commodification as I compare a forced spontaneity of the stage actor with the play of a child learning theatre games during the Depression (Spolin, 1986), from a woman who understood what it meant to teach. She understood spontaneity and knew how to tease it out of the children she worked with. Spolin enjoyed and encouraged spontaneity because “...through spontaneity we are re-formed into ourselves...” (p. 4). Thus, when a spontaneous moment is created and employed, the things we work with, athletic play, theatre, music, and curriculum are potentially improved. A desire is inculcated within the people who play for infinite malleability. But don’t get me wrong. I am not proposing an infinite malleability that can serve as a justification for anything goes. Instead, I propose an infinite malleability because it will hone our skill in dealing with the complex: filled with

precision and ambiguity, but not understood as mutually exclusive.

#### CHAPTER 4 “YOU SHOULDN’T NEED A WEATHERMAN TO KNOW WHICH WAY THE WIND BLOWS: POPULAR CULTURE AND IMPROVISATION

Chapter 4 continues a discussion on the merits and pitfalls of popular culture. I will argue that the problem regarding popular culture as it relates to the musician, theatrical improviser, or audience is largely a function of the stance one takes regarding popular culture, rather than placing the blame on popular culture itself. In the beginning of chapter 4 I work to compare contemporary popular culture with medieval folk traditions to try and extract from the latter the impact and transformation written about and noticed by Bakhtin (1984). As I read Bakhtin’s descriptions of this folk culture I was struck by the similarity it had with contemporary popular culture improvised and composed. I describe the difficulties of using popular culture as a site and a source of praxis with help from cultural theorists such as Dasgupta and Weaver (2000), Lyotard (1984), Heidegger (1977), and The Frankfurt School (1973, 2002, and 2007). My reason for focusing on popular culture as a site for praxis is because, in its various iterations, popular culture has served as the raw material for improvisation, as is the case when a jazz artist quotes a popular song while improvising; making the song fit the time signature, harmonic, and melodic structure. Also, at different times in the modern and postmodern era, jazz has served as an example *of* popular culture. Thus, as I interrogate improvisation in jazz and theatre it makes sense to examine popular culture because of its association with the arts, high and low, improvisational and composed, as part of my overall analysis of the connection between good teaching and improvisation.

Perhaps one of the reasons why the Bakhtinian folk tradition seems worthy of our attention is the connection between that folk tradition and the people who created, nurtured, and transformed that tradition. While illiteracy and genuine fears of their eternal souls burning in hell contributed to a largely passive stance when it came to organized Christianity, Bakhtin's analysis of medieval folk traditions refutes that passivity. Indeed, the participants of that folk tradition took an active role in the creation of their songs, stories, and theatre. Bakhtin reminds us that these creative outlets, which at times were vulgar, served as an outlet and critique of political and economic discord. I wonder, therefore, whether or not our largely passive stance regarding popular culture can be changed. Is it possible for us to create our culture? Or are we stuck as passive consumers of a product that is largely unsatisfying despite its large portions? Or am I stuck on my high horse so to speak, regarding popular culture and the way in which that culture is accessed? Am I behaving like one of

the elite upset about the "low level" of journalism or television always assumes that the public is moulded by the products imposed on it. To assume that is to misunderstand the act of "consumption." This misunderstanding assumes that "assimilating" necessarily means "becoming similar" to what one is, making it one's own, appropriating or reappropriating it (De Certeau, 1984, p. 166).

Leif Gustavson's (2008) important study of youth culture, which I discuss in chapter 6, and Constance Penley's (1997) *NASA/TREK*, which I discuss in chapter 3, supports De Certeau's assertion regarding a perhaps more accurate way to conceive of "consumption" and "assimilation."

To be sure some popular culture, especially the ones which exist on the margins, can critique the status quo and remove, or at least minimize passivity from the observer. This is why I discuss the film, *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*. As I will argue, *Rocky Horror* mostly works as an act of resistance and creates an alternative public space for the filmmaker and filmgoer to work out their sexual ambiguities in the safe environment of a mythical, late night, non-judgmental “feature show.” Certainly part of the allure of *Rocky Horror* is the in your face sexuality, camp and kitsch that make up so much of the film. Perhaps the more important conclusion that one can derive from the Rocky Horror film experience is the significance of the organic way in which the filmgoers interacted with the film as they attended the midnight showings (the only time to release films like *Rocky Horror* or *Pink Flamingoes*, by John Waters) during the 1970’s and early 1980’s. It is important to examine the source of those improvisations, not in the vain hopes for a recipe for improvisation, since that would be a waste of time, but to continue my attempt at demystifying the act of improvisation. Interestingly, as time wore on many of the “spontaneous remarks” made by the audience members of *Rocky Horror* quickly became part of the film experience. What was at one time the constructed improvisational response of an audience member or members eventually became part of the film’s “script.” Week after week audiences yearned to hear their favorite improvised lines or reenact one of a series of actions, like the tossing of toast in the air that at one point was the spontaneous response to a filmic cue (It is reasonable to ask why an audience member had an available piece of toast to throw up in the air. It’s possible that a smuggled in sandwich served as the initial prop). In this way, *Rocky Horror* demonstrates how popular culture that dwells in and is created in the margins, by non-compositional

methods like improvisation, can lose its ability to shock. Lose its ability to provoke improvisation, and instead return the participant to his more familiar role of spectator and consumer.

## CHAPTER 5

### PLAYWRITING AS SOLO IMPROVISATION: MY TURN TO TAKE A SOLO

In chapter 5, I create a form of popular culture, the play. I wrote this play that takes place in a dystopian future for many reasons: I wrote this play because I thought it would be a way to distance myself from a linear, organized, academic work. I got the idea to include a work of fiction within an academic work when I read the monumental *Academic Outlaws* (1997), by William G. Tierney. In his book he offers a work of “ethnographic fiction” (p. xxi), entitled “Ashes”. Tierney wrote this story, “...with the hope that its narrative structure would give me greater leeway to present life in the academy than other textual techniques might afford” (p. xxi). I thought a play might give me a similar leeway in promoting an improvisational approach to being in the classroom. When I initially set about to write this play I did so with the intention of using as much of the improvisational moment and techniques as possible in the construction of the play, while also attempting to portray that improvisational moment(s) through the words and actions of the characters of the play. I treated the play like an elaborate improvisational game. For example, I assembled the who, what, where, and when for each scene in the same manner in which a player on stage asks the audience for that information prior to the creation of an improvisational scene (with the very important distinction that I asked and answered all of the questions). In other words I assembled the ingredients for the improvisational scene to come. I knew who my characters were, what they were doing, and a good degree of information regarding place and time. I purposely



refrained from story boarding the plot. Instead, I wanted the action of the play to emerge organically from the character's interactions and to set myself up for the possibility of surprise within the writing process. I wrote the play because it was a way for me to "take a solo." Solo improvisation is taken up by Judith Lewis (2013) who writes that "...in solo improvisation, the inherent qualities and purest possibilities of improvisation...may become apparent to an extent, which might even influence the way in which we look at possibilities in collaborative improvisation." (p. 256). Additionally, I learned about an idea of Slavoj Žižek's in an essay by Peter Appelbaum (2013) called "...retrodictive curriculum theorizing...in which one writes the fictional history of an imagined future...to suggest that we confront the catastrophe by perceiving it as fate, totally unavoidable, and then projecting ourselves into it" (p. 85). Indeed, my description of a dystopian future was a way for me to expose and perhaps attack the insult to intelligence and humanity that is the current school experience. Lastly, I wrote the play because I wanted to play with hyperbole. My thinking was hyperbole could describe the insanity of school in ways that traditional scholarship could not.

## CHAPTER 6 IMPROVISATION, INSTITUTIONS AND STANDARDS

In chapter 6, I examine the impact that improvisation has on standards and institutions. I examine whether or not improvisation can serve to give us some distance from those standards in order to critique them and eventually to improve them. In my analysis I discover that improvisation can fully separate from the standard its attempting to critique. I do find it useful to examine opportunities for improvisation in the classroom, jazz hall, and theatre to still engage in praxis despite the limitations. I am helped in this

discussion by Curriculum scholars like William Ayers (2004), William Pinar (1994) Henry Giroux (1983) and Ted Aoki (2005). Once again I look outside of the academy to others who might offer insight into my query. For example, I benefit from the work of anthropologist, Laurie Frederik Meer (2007) and her analysis of a Cuban theatre form that uses improvisation and the Cuban authorities' reaction to improvisation. I found it interesting that a society which praises collective action fears improvisation to such a degree that the players are never allowed to improvise in public. I also reexamine the American improv scene, especially from the 1950's through the 1980's with the help of Amy Seham's (2001) encyclopedic history of improv. The analyses of the Cuban and American improv scene demonstrated the significance of the group mind. Unfortunately, improvisation alone was incapable of isolating the systemic problems of white reign, heteronormativity, commodification, colonization and the usual assortment of ills the critical theorist is attempting to expose so as to empower the oppressed. I also gain some insight from the great British Theatre director Peter Brook (2008). Interestingly, in my analysis of the interaction of the new thing created by and through improvisation with the accepted standard of a given institution I discovered a common theme: the actor or musician who improvises, who seeks to create something new, rarely let's go of her hold on the standard which came before. Instead, a tension exists between the old and the attempted new or as Aoki (2005) likes to write, the, "... ambiguous, ambivalent space between this or that, between planned curriculum and live(d) curriculum ..." (p. 421-422). I found it interesting that the space between planned and live(d) was more dynamic if the participants in that space had a desire or urgency to do, or at least make known, what needs to be done, as did the participants of Playback Theatre described by Meer

(2007) Those Cuban actors were filled with anger and passion. They were also pre-disposed to take risks. In contrast, the space between planned and live(d) inhabited by the majority of white improvisers described by Amy Seham (2001) lacked energy or urgency since the participants of that space were more inclined to accept the status quo rather than reject it.

## CHAPTER 7 BEYOND PERFORMATIVITY AND A COOKBOOK CURRICULUM

In chapter 7 I examine improvisation, performativity, and good teaching. I acknowledge the negative interpretation of performativity brought largely to our attention by Lyotard (1984), and Cherryholmes (1988) and the continued existence of performative pedagogy in American schools and elsewhere. For example, in England Anne Storey (2007) gave me some insight into an important cultural shift that has taken hold in England, which has been repeated in America. Alarming, many new teachers are entering the field from a background of mid-level managerial positions, outside of the world of education. Although they are being pushed out of their old professions because of changes within the economy, their placement as teachers is being promoted as a coup for education since their “skills” as managers are seen as directly applicable to and desirable in the classroom. Like the United States, England is placing emphasis on “...defining and ‘managing’ the performance of teachers” (p. 253). And I examine the possibility of agency which emerges out of an alternative version of performativity that come from scholars such as J. Hillis Miller (2007), Karen Barad (2003), and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (2003) (who build upon the work of Austin, Butler and Derrida) in addition to others, and in conjunction with those who have written about improvisation

within jazz and dramaturgical settings, in my attempt to promote a richer experience in the classroom. Sedgwick's work is especially intriguing since she examines performative speech and what she terms as peripformative speech (2003). Sedgwick acknowledges the relative strength of performative speech acts to either maintain or challenge the status quo, yet maintains that the more nuanced peripformative responses such as, "...I won't take you up on it. Who are you to dare me? Who cares what you dare me to do?...tend to have a high threshold of initiative..." (p. 70). In other words, she argues that the peripformative has a greater ability to buck conventional thought. Her insight into the power of various speech acts is useful to the teacher in the classroom as she and her students make their way through classes that at times can be contentious.

## CHAPTER 8 CODA AND CURRICULUM

In chapter 8 I wind down. Like the musician who returns to the coda after a lengthy journey. My intention with this brief chapter was to "restate the melody" in a way that is familiar yet different enough to instigate continued conversations. And central to my work is my continued dwelling in between two poles: what Aoki (2005) has described as living within the ambiguity of curriculum as planned and curriculum as live(d). I hope that I was able to convey the importance of not simply dwelling in between those poles. More important is the response to the inevitable tensionality of those two poles. The jazz musicians, theatrical improvisers, audience members, teachers and students who do good work did so because, instead of succumbing to the pull of one or the other extreme, they offered a response, some mediated and thought through beforehand, and others seemingly

spontaneous, that addressed both concerns. In this sense they were able to mediate their wandering with the discipline which comes from hard work.

## CHAPTER 2

### i Play Therefore I am

“Above all, don’t fear difficult moments, the best comes from them.”

Rita Levi Montalcini (Nobel Prize Winning Scientist)

“In jazz you never know what’s coming.”

Nat Hentoff (Jazz writer)

In my youth I had some stage time. High school plays, community theatre, and the small yet potent semi-professional theatre. None of my performances were extraordinary save for a few memorable lines that had more to do with the playwright than the actor. When I was twenty-eight I enrolled in a class that focused on improvisational comedy. Predictably, it was hard and many of the “performances” were ragged and unpolished. In the beginning we were only performing for ourselves so it didn’t matter as much whether or not we put on a good show. Finally, when we did perform for a live audience we created shows which were very uneven and amateurish. For reasons that are still unknown to me I endured these “performances” for many months. Gradually we (improvisational theatre is usually performed as an ensemble) got better. The first time I was part of something really good I was playing (more on the importance of play later) a theatre game called interview. It’s a deceptively simple game played by two actors. The audience comes up with the name of the show and the field of the “expert” who is interviewed. The questions and answers are made up on the spot. We killed (a theatrical expression meaning the audience really liked us). In retrospect this is the first time I experienced the power of improvisation within an aesthetic context. This chapter is the beginning of an exploration for me. I wish to examine the promise of improvisation within two fields that I feel intuitively, and know intellectually, share an

aesthetic connection: Jazz and improvisational theatre. My reason for this examination is that will argue that that improvisation has important things to teach us, especially in the realm of educational pedagogy. For now, I will focus on the perceived impact of improvisation on jazz and comedic performances.

Those who believe in the power of improvisation feel that improvisation can imbue a pre-written performance with not only renewed energy but also change its form. In his study of improvisation, Jazz guitarist and writer Derek Bailey (1980) ostensibly goes beyond his field, because in his examination of improvisation he quotes the great comedian Lenny Bruce: ““If I do an hour show, if I’m extremely fertile, there will be about fifteen minutes of pure ad-lib. But on average it’s about four or five minutes. But the fact that I’ve created it in ad-lib seems to give it a complete feeling of free form”” (p.65). Bruce’s monologue takes on an added strength and changes its form because of the inclusion of an improvised bit. Indeed, Bailey writes, “...Lenny Bruce often compared his working method with those of the jazzman and here he emphasizes the importance of the introduction of new material. It doesn’t only supply fresh stuff to work on, it imbues the whole with a spirit of freedom” (p. 65). Thus for Bruce and Bailey the act of improvisation is transformative. In this sense the whole is greater than the sum of its parts.

Whitney Balliett (1992), longtime jazz critic for the New Yorker, calls jazz “the sound of surprise” (p.25). Often it’s the musician who experiences this surprise. Jazz writer Nat Hentoff (1976) recalls an incident when,

One night, in the late 1940’s, a student from the New England Conservatory of Music came into a jazz room in Boston where Pee Wee [jazz clarinetist Pee Wee

Russell] was playing, went up to the stand, and unrolled a series of music manuscript pages. They were covered, densely, with what looked like the notes of an extraordinarily complex, ambitious classical composition. ‘I brought this for you,’ the young man said to Pee Wee Russell. ‘It’s one of your solos from last night. I transcribed it.’ Pee Wee, shaking his head, looked at the manuscript. ‘This can’t be me,’ he said. ‘I can’t play this.’ The student assured Pee Wee that the transcribed solo, with its fiendishly brilliant structure and astonishingly sustained inventiveness, was indeed Russell’s. ‘Well,’ Pee Wee said, ‘even if it is, I wouldn’t play it again the same way-even if I could, which I can’t’ (p. 13).

There is a lot in Russell’s statement. First, this incident is an example of what can happen when jazz music is played by a powerful improviser. Russell was able to improvise a brilliant piece of music on the spot. But more importantly, this incident, like so many in jazz, shows a constant, often repeated tenet of jazz improvisation in particular, and improvisation in a more general sense: Most improvisations, musical, theatrical, or other, combine the well-learned tenets of an aesthetic tradition with the creation of something new through improvisation. Importantly, there is a problem regarding the way improvisation is understood by its practitioners: The improvisational creation is viewed as new and spontaneous, completely unfettered by the past and its connection to an aesthetic tradition. This conversation has been complicated by Jacques Derrida (1982), Michel de De Certeau (1984), Judith Lewis (2013), and Edward Sarath (2013) as their arguments complexify the improvisational moment and its components.

But to return to my earlier statement regarding the apparent merging of old and new and the consequential tension which exists between those two things, there are



fascinating parallels between an improvised jazz piece and the Buddhist Mandala.

(Although it is beyond the scope of this study to examine the similarities between jazz and Eastern religions like Buddhism, I would like to offer one example of an important similarity. In a combined study of symbols within dreams Carl G. Jung and others (1964) write in the important book, *Man and His Symbols*, "The mandala serves a conservative purpose—namely, to restore a previously existing order. But it also serves the creative purpose of giving expression and form to something that does not yet exist, something new and unique.... The process is that of the ascending spiral, which grows upward while simultaneously returning again and again to the same point" (p. 225). I find it striking that in the same way the mandala serves to conserve and create, so does the attempt by the jazz musician to create something new with improvisation). The jazz musicians' creation arguably does conserve in the sense that so much of his improvisations rests on, and is a reaction to, the tradition of jazz music. But when improvisation is used, as understood by many who practice the art, something new is also created, as is argued by the musicians in Bailey's study (1980), alluded to in Jung's take on the mandala (1964) and seen in Paul Berliner's (1994) mammoth study of jazz. Thus, when shown a manuscript of the previous night's performance, Pee Wee Russell couldn't believe it was he who produced it. Moreover, allowing it was he who produced it for a moment Russell would eventually claim that he couldn't re-produce it. Nor would he want to. Jazz isn't about playing what's already been played. In fact one of its primary attributes paradoxically is its ephemeral character. Importantly, Russell would not have been able to recreate the performance that so impressed that student from the New England Conservatory of Music-whose name alone is anathema to the spirit of jazz- were it not for his ability to

improvise. Indeed, Bailey writes, “There is no doubt that the single most important contribution to the revitalization of improvisation in Western music in the 20<sup>th</sup> century was that made by jazz...” (p. 64). Thus improvisation in jazz not only improved jazz itself, and the performers who play jazz, but other forms of Western music that had deemphasized (for example classical music) the importance of improvisation.

A lot has been written on the power and influence of improvisation to improve music and the musician: Bailey (1980), Corbett (1994), and Berliner (1994). Indeed, this theme of improvisational transformation is fundamental to a Canadian journal on improvisation called, *Critical Studies in Improvisation* (2004-present). Jacques Attali (1999), a French economist employed by Francois Mitterrand, published a seminal book in the 1980’s on jazz music’s ability to do more than just improve the music. Attali’s *Noise The Political Economy of Music* was in one way a rebuke to the pessimism of the Critical Theorists of the Frankfurt School, who emigrated from Germany in the 1930’s and 1940’s. Clearly, their idealistic fervor and attempt to create a better metanarrative that saw the value of popular culture had been crushed by the realities of National Socialism. Indeed, as Martin Jay has written (1993), Kracauer, Horkheimer, and Adorno, “...rarely showed anything but visceral distaste for all variants of mass culture...” (p. 369). Their point is well taken. The horrific realities of National Socialism thus make Attali’s arguments all the more significant. Indeed, in his forward to Attali’s book (1999) postmodernist Frederic Jameson writes, “The originality of Jacques Attali’s book then becomes clear: he is the first to have drawn the other possible consequence of the ‘reciprocal interaction’ model-namely, the possibility of a superstructure to anticipate historical developments, to foreshadow new social formations...” (p. xi). Jazz music for

Attali, especially free jazz, the most experimental form of jazz to date, became for him an abstract manifestation of a new social order. It reflects a new way for humankind to exist in a world that is designed to alienate, although the specific forms of this society to come remain far from fully formed. In free jazz Attali sees an abstract of the promise of liberation and the fulfillment of humankind's capabilities. It isn't so much the inherent properties of Jazz music per se that Attali is attracted to but rather the fact that jazz is music that is forever concerned with creating something new. It stirs things up. It threatens the status quo. Power operates from the bottom up, or from side to side, at times it's hard to tell who is in charge: Importantly, in jazz power never operates from the top down. Thus, what is most radical in jazz is not the product but the process, despite the fact that the two are inextricably linked. It is perhaps this characteristic of jazz that is the reason it is seen as threatening by some. Since its creation in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, jazz music has been Othered. In Balliett's study of jazz (1959) we understand the initial marginalization of jazz music and the musicians who play it in a scathing review of jazz icon Louis Armstrong: "...Grossman heaps most of the evils he finds in swing, bebop, and progressive jazz on poor Armstrong, describing him as playing with 'an undisciplined emotional expansiveness,' and 'wildness'..." (p. 18). The critic's condemnation of Armstrong is due to many factors and while I would argue that the central reason is race, another important reason is jazz music's abstract disruption of power structures. To be sure, white America, in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, held distorted, inaccurate views on African Americans, especially the African American male. Since jazz music was the creation of African Americans, mostly male, jazz music started off as damaged goods in the eyes of white America, because of its association with the African

American male. Jazz also suffered from its connection to brothels (jazz music, either live or recorded, was often played there), and the act of sex, for which jazz was a euphemism. It tainted jazz from the beginning. Jazz music existed on the margins of society. Jazz could not be anything but Othered. “To jazz” was to engage in sexual intercourse and in that sense is analogous to early rock music. Indeed the terms ‘jazz’ and ‘rock’ were initially euphemisms for the act of sex. It’s interesting that both terms have lost their ability to shock. They have been tamed. I will examine a few of the reasons behind this phenomenon in the latter part of my chapter. Interestingly, jazz as a musical form also met resistance from many within the musical academy, for reasons that go beyond race. This resistance remains to this day. Indeed, commenting from his position as a college music instructor, Ken Prouty (2008) writes, “If we accept Attali’s argument that improvised music creates new forms of social interaction and new dynamics, we can posit that the reaction against jazz improvisation in the academy taps into a similar belief that improvisation represented a challenge to the existing order...” (p. 5) In other words, jazz improvisation and jazz music (not synonymous) was accurately seen as a political threat. Thus, the drive within the academy to defend the canon from a radical element is based on their accurate perception that improvisational jazz represented a larger political, economic, and social threat. One could argue that their defensiveness bolsters Attali’s thesis.

For now I would like to continue my discussion of Attali’s thesis that jazz music contains a foreshadowing of a new way to politically and economically organize society and examine two additional claims. I would argue that Attali’s thesis and these two claims are related. The first important claim is that jazz music can reduce or eliminate

humankind's alienation. The second claim is jazz music's ability to allow the musician to live in the moment, to achieve what Hans Gumbrecht (2004) has termed an "epiphany" (p. 113). Gumbrecht's use of the term epiphany is important to my analysis of that nascent moment of creation that does two important things: First, it is a response that, in the case of the jazz musician, is a musical response to all that has come before. Second, it is simultaneously a direction for the rest of the players, or in the case of solo jazz, a direction for the solo artist as she continues her piece. Still, in many ways epiphanies remain more of a mystery than expected event in the course of an improvisational player's aesthetic life. Indeed, they are unpredictable and of course difficult, if not impossible, to pre-ordain by virtue of one's skill or breadth of knowledge. At this point it seems reasonable to accuse Attali of giving to jazz that which it couldn't possibly possess: the power to reduce alienation. In light of this concern Attali (1999) writes, "...Alienation is not born of production and exchange, nor of property, but of usage: the moment labor has a goal... the producer becomes a stranger to what he produces..." (p.134-135). Clearly musicians like the previously mentioned Pee Wee Russell and scores of others have been able to compose brilliantly conceived music yet afterward have no idea how they accomplished it or even what their accomplishment was. Russell and others of his ilk would make very bad assembly line workers or any other kind of employee as far as corporate America is concerned, because as they produce they would intuitively create products that are counter to the requirements of the CEO and his allegiance to the stockholders. They would also alter the production process in ways that would make Frederick Taylor, who perfected the assembly lines of the early twentieth century, wince. Indeed, for Attali the fact that he and the other musicians were unaware

of their end goal is central to their ability to potentially move away from alienation and open up to who they are, in contrast to the commodified version of what they are expected to be. What is happening to them? They are playing in the fullest sense of that term, instead of succumbing to what Peter McLaren (1995) has referred to as, "...a culture modeled on a masculinist heroics, a reactive desire and a compulsive need to consume..." (p. 88). Indeed, within this play is a refutation of McLaren's concern: Importantly, within their play lies an act of disruption, since the very thing being disrupted is a passivity, cloaked in consumerist action, which McLaren critiques. In this type of play is also an opportunity for freedom. Indeed, in *Releasing the Imagination* (1995), Maxine Greene writes:

But then I think of how much beginnings have to do with freedom, how much disruption has to do with consciousness and the awareness of possibility that has so much to do with teaching other human beings. And I think that if I and other teachers truly want to provoke our students to break through the limits of the conventional and taken for granted, we ourselves have to experience breaks with what has been established in our own lives; we have to keep arousing ourselves to begin again...to act in such a way that I break loose from anchorage and that I stir others to break loose along with me, so that we all become different, that we all engage in a dialectic to reach beyond where we are (p 109-110).

To be sure, Greene isn't referring to the type of play exhibited by jazz musicians, but I think the freedom she desires is at times displayed by those who improvise and seek to improvise, like jazz musicians. I would argue that the play exhibited by jazz musicians can serve as a model for teachers who desire to break out of the taken for granted.

Teachers should play with ideas as they're introduced in classroom discussions. In this way they can model an approach to information. In time, perhaps their students can take the same approach.

In a similar manner, the social fabric that supports alienation, and its necessary components, like commodified play are hurt when actual play, like that of the jazz musician is part of the human experience. The political stability, informed by a type of political passiveness, that is necessary for an unregulated industrial society, would be at risk if people extrapolated ideas from the jazz musician's experience and applied them toward societal organization, or play. Unfortunately, the ability to break free from the controlling elements of that society has been corrupted by the various components of society that support a flawed economic system, such as commodified play, or a violent patriarchy described by McLaren. I talk more about liberating play in chapters three and four, but for now I would like to remark on this one thought by Schiller (2004). In his study of art and society Schiller writes, "...Man plays only when he is in the full sense of the word a man, and *he is only wholly Man when he is playing...*" (p. 80). Although it would give my high school Latin teacher fits to have to revise Descartes' famous dictum, I agree with Schiller. Thus it would be more accurate to say, *i play therefore I am*. (I thought I was oh so clever with my variation on Descartes, however, a quick Google search showed me I wasn't the first to come up with this expression) Schiller understood that humankind would be somewhat undeveloped if she lived only in her head, accepting and dwelling within a play that is artificial, commodified, and disconnected to whom we actually are. Gumbrecht (2006) knows this too as is evidenced in his examination of the interplay of athletes.

The best in jazz musicianship embody this concept of play. Bailey (1993) and the musicians he interviews explain this very serious play in their discussions of ideomatic and non-ideomatic jazz. In a nutshell, ideomatic jazz refers to the technical skills necessary to play the instrument and the ability to use a “vocabulary” that has already been created. This vocabulary is part of a complex harmonic and melodic structure. This is the “language” of the academy. It is a language of consensus. It’s been peer reviewed and verified by “experts” in the field. It works, so use it. Non-ideomatic improvisation occurs when musicians appear to play the “wrong” notes. Non-ideomatic expression isn’t always the goal, per se, but it can result from the unbridled play of musicians willing to take a risk and play without a predetermined end product in mind. Occasionally, this type of unbridled play produces radical results, as was the case when “be-bop” first appeared on the scene in the 1940’s. In many ways, musically and socially for example, be-bop was an act of violence, albeit violence of a musical sort. Jazz music had become co-opted by white musicians, almost from the very beginning (who typically sanitized the music). Be-bop was therefore an attempt to take it back, however, the deleterious nature of Jim Crow also contributed to the musicians’ need for violence, even, as was apparent in this case, in the abstract sense (Charlie Parker was reputed to have remarked to the poet, Amiri Baraka that he plays jazz the way he does so he doesn’t have to kill white people). Gumbrecht has argued (2004) that some aesthetic experience contain an element of violence that I would argue is part of the process that allows the musician to switch between idioms or devise new ones. While his examples are a Bullfight or a boxing match, (2004) literal acts of violence, I would argue that jazz contains a similar act of violence, both in the abstract and in its execution. Indeed, since the 1930’s jazz musicians



have engaged in “cutting contests” whereby they would attempt to outplay any musician who dared to challenge them on the stage. In fact the early reputation of sax great Coleman Hawkins was based on his ability to outplay his opponents. It was said that he destroyed them. I find it intriguing that jazz incorporates language that refers to violence. Interestingly, a similar violence occurs within improvisational theatre. Indeed, coming out of Wisconsin in the late 1980’s “Theater Sports” combines the competitiveness of an athletic event with the unpredictable theatricality of improvisational theatre. Moreover, it is common for the comic or the improvisational comedienne to use the expression “I killed” in reference to her relationship with the audience. To do well is to kill them and despite its metaphorical status still produces the same effect that Gumbrecht (2004) refers to in his description of the bullfight or boxing match. To kill them is to welcome “...the risk of losing control over oneself-at least temporarily” (p. 116).

For musicians like Prouty (2008), when the best musicians play they are able to switch back between the older idioms and the one they just created. “...improvisation lies not just with the creation of new spaces and possibilities, but also with the adherence to established techniques and approaches, with what has come before...” (p. 9). In time the new idioms successfully change the structure and content of the older idioms and in this way revitalize them. Non-ideomatic playing, discussed by Murphy (2004) keeps things fresh: “Ideomatic improvisational techniques are the key to the continuity and stability of jazz (and other musical idioms), not just because of the way they form a framework for clear expression and communication among those competent in the idiom, but also because of their pedagogical utility...” (p. 135). But for jazz music to not merely survive but thrive, its practitioners must engage with non-ideomatic playing. The same concept

holds true for any aesthetic medium. Of course the real question is where the musicians get these new idioms from. We might also ask ourselves the same thing about those athletes who have just made the play of a lifetime. Are they the result of mastering the fundamentals? The athletes, like the great musicians, have so wholly mastered the fundamentals that not only can they apply them when needed but because of their attentiveness to the moment, in a Benjaminian (2007) sense, now have the ability to alter that moment, and by extension the fundamentals, as necessary, yet when examined in retrospect know not from where it came (“I’m just glad to help us get a win”).

Gumbrecht (2004), in his discussion of the arts, writes, “...if it occurs we do not know what form it will take and how intense it will be: there are no two bolts of lightning... and no two orchestra performances that will interpret the same score in exactly the same way. Finally (and above all), epiphany within aesthetic experience is an event because it undoes itself while it emerges...” (p. 113). Admittedly, Gumbrecht is referring to interpretations of classical compositions but his point still has merit for our discussion because the performers of his orchestra are improvising, albeit at a lesser rate than most jazz performers. For in that moment of improvisation (and for Gumbrecht this can occur in team sports too) the player has rid herself of the shackles of production in a Marxian sense. Perhaps this is what Gumbrecht means when he states that the event “undoes itself.” Or he could be referring to the ephemeral nature of the event: in other words one will never hear in the case of music, or see in the case of sports another event exactly like the one that so impressed us again. Gumbrecht’s analogy of team sports and its natural association with play are fitting. When we witness a beautiful play in team sports (pick your favorite if you’re a sports fan) all that was once prominent-commercials for erectile

dysfunction, bad beer, and trucks; or who's winning the game- fades away, and if we are attentive to the beauty that is happening we too can get lost and gain something from the "temporality of the moment" (p. 113). In sports, this moment might only last a few seconds, if that. In jazz it depends on the time and the performer. A favorite anecdote among jazz aficionados concerns the young Louis Armstrong. His ability to improvise for thirty or forty choruses is well documented. Moreover, Armstrong's playing seemed to defy temporal limitations. He was able to create that epiphany in aesthetic experience that Gumbrecht praises so highly. Armstrong's ability to create these epiphanies is part of the reason for his legendary status among musicians in the know and attentive listeners. Armstrong's improvisational skills are what Attali (1999) refers to as his ability to compose. He writes, "...To compose is to stay repetition and the death inherent in it...to locate liberation not in a faraway future... but in the *present*, in production and in one's own enjoyment" (p. 143). Attali's use of the term composition is perhaps problematic, because it implies that improvisation is simply fast composing. Musician and professor of music Edward Sarath (2013) will dispute this claim.

For now I would like to return to my discussion of the nascent, improvisational moment of creation. Although they are working from two very different theoretical frameworks, Attali and Gumbrecht both see the importance of creating and appreciating these moments of intensity; however, while Attali finds references to a utopian future to come (a threat to the modern and postmodern eras) Gumbrecht's findings are less grandiose, but still important and perhaps more realistic. He seems to concentrate on ways for the individual to overcome that Cartesian split of mind and body, which for Gumbrecht are more important than overcoming the constraints of a superstructure,

which seem to fuel Attali's efforts to find clues embedded within the music of a utopian society to come. Gumbrecht (2004) is refreshingly honest in his declaration that "... There is,... no pedagogically guaranteed way of leading students... 'toward' aesthetic experience;... there is no predictable, obvious or typical yield that aesthetic experience can add to our lives in the everyday world's..." (p. 101-102). In my analysis of improvisational theatre, jazz music, and popular culture, I have found Gumbrecht's pronouncement, regarding the impossibility of predicting how or when these intense moments of improvisational creation can or will happen, to be an honest feature of the improvisational moment. Perhaps this characteristic of improvisation can help us understand why improvisation can never be taught or learned through a specific method. As Roland Barthes (1972) has reminded us, "The invariable fact is that a piece of work which ceaselessly proclaims its determination for method is ultimately sterile: everything has been put into the method, nothing is left for writing:...No surer way to kill a piece of research and send it to join the great waste of abandoned projects than Method..." (p. 201). Method kills liberating pedagogy.

Given Barthes' and Gumbrecht's proclamations on method, the one surefire way of preventing a student from experiencing possible moments of creative intensity is to make things too simple for them, by suggesting that there exists a method to get there. In other words, it is purposeful creation of complexity that forces a student to react in innovative ways that at times creates moments of sheer brilliance. For musicians like the previously mentioned Pee Wee Russell his brilliance is a consequence of having to react to the instantaneous decisions made by his fellow musicians. The music he played had to fit with what his fellow musicians created and he in turn had to make sense of their

complexity. They in turn had to react appropriately to his creations. Sometimes these complicated conversations work and sometimes they don't. To be sure Russell's ability to improvise brilliantly is based on years of playing and honing his skills as a musician. In learning the ideomatic structure well enough to be able to, when necessary, turn it on its head, so to speak. Gumbrecht (2004) further writes, "For good academic teaching is a staging of complexity; it is drawing our students' attention toward complex phenomenon and problems, rather than prescribing how they have to understand certain problems..." (p. 128). Thus, it would be reasonable to suggest that the stimulus to create these moments of intensity within an aesthetic experience is for students, or jazz musicians, or actors in improvisational theatre, to be forced to deal with an array of complexities. To be sure accurately deciding the nature and makeup of these complexities can be problematic. Many in the academy resort to an established canon that can potentially reinforce the existing order and prevent the student from creating something new and wonderful. This is the critique that has accompanied the charge of neo-conservatism against Stanley Crouch and Wynton Marsalis (1990). In the jazz world the critique against this well-known jazz writer and jazz musician is that their approach to jazz is similar to that of a museum curator rather than an active creator of the "products" that wound up in the museum. I understand the attachment to the canon. Neither Russell nor Armstrong would have been able to create something wonderful in jazz music if they had not mastered the idiom of jazz, although in Armstrong's case he invented much of that idiom. Also, as a live performer it is tempting to rely on something that has worked before. And yet both comedians and jazz musicians have experienced playing the same song, or telling the same joke twice and not getting the same result. Failure feels bad and

no one wants to die (violence in language again) on stage or in the classroom.

Armstrong's and Russell's "genius" however lies in their new response to that idiom instead of their rigid adherence to it (and more importantly to their willingness to take a risk and try something new or allow something new to occur). In improvisational theatre there is a saying, well known to those who practice and perform its art: "You can't break the rules until you learn the rules." Perhaps their "genius" lies in knowing when and how to break the rules; or allowing oneself to be attuned to the moment that in effect makes that decision for you. Still, the origins of spontaneity are complicated. It is quite possible that true spontaneity is an impossibility, if both the act and the product must represent something entirely new created as an ephemeral epiphany. Deleuze and Guattari (1994) seem to suggest that the musician constructs her improvisational response to the needs of a complex musical problem rather than give thanks to the gods of spontaneity. The musician and athlete have taken part in an aesthetic experience that Deleuze and Guattari would describe as being "immanent to itself." In this way they can explore and open up the song or the athletic play in ways that are solely concerned with what is happening within that play or song at that moment rather than lose focus to a concern that is external to the event. John Corbett (1994), who examines music in his book, *Extended Play: Sounding off from John Cage to Dr. Funkenstein*, has this to say on the subject of spontaneity: '...We say quite the opposite: desire only exists when assembled or machined. You cannot grasp or conceive of a desire outside a determinate assemblage...each group or individual should construct the plane of immanence on which they lead their life and carry their business...It is constructivist, not at all spontaneist'" (p. 85). I am very interested in the examination of spontaneity since it seems integral to the

study of improvisation. It would seem clear, however, that every jazz musician who effectively answered the demand of complexity, and construct what appears to be a spontaneous reply to a musical prompt, did so because she was extremely well versed in the idioms that have already been created. In other words she knew the rules.

For Attali the most important movement within jazz began in the late 1950's and continues to this day, however not in the economic relationship Attali would like. The movement is known as free jazz and many jazz artists work in this mode (or perhaps it would be better to say they work outside the mode) since it affords them the opportunity to create something new more often. The problem is it doesn't always work. Or it isn't respected by the "experts" in jazz. Indeed, well respected jazz critic Whitney Balliett (1959) has argued that "... Most experimental jazz has been governed by a queer dilettantism of newness for newness' sake, and much of it has been little more than an agglomeration of classical technique pasted onto standard jazz content..." (p. 82). More often than not new musical forms are misinterpreted or simply unappreciated. For example, when Louis Armstrong first heard Bebop, the new revolutionary noise in the late 1940s, he likened it to "Chinese music." In other words Armstrong was most definitely not impressed with the new sound. Ironically, those who first heard Louis Armstrong's music in the late 1920s and early 1930s (when Armstrong was bringing together for the first time seemingly disparate elements of music, creating his gumbo, so to speak) felt the same way about his music when compared, for example, to the classical canon so familiar to the Creole community of New Orleans. Marsalis' allegiance to Bebop is therefore doubly ironic since he is acutely aware of the transition from the type of music played by Louis Armstrong to that played by its inventors, Charlie Parker,

Dizzy Gillespie and Thelonious Monk. The same process that created Louis Armstrong's music and Bebop music is behind free jazz. But Attali (1999) argues (although I partially disagree with his assessment) that jazz had become colonized and that free jazz represented "...the first attempt to express in economic terms the refusal of the cultural alienation inherent in repetition, to use music to build a new culture" (p. 138). I would argue that Armstrong and those Bebop innovators like Monk did exactly the same thing that Attali's free jazz musicians did when they created their distinct forms of music. I would further argue that free jazz has been misinterpreted as a musical style without form because the form it has is so different from that which came before. Attali would disagree with Balliett about the musical merits of some free jazz but ultimately conclude that free jazz failed since some of its adherents became part of the problem when their small record labels were bought out by the major labels. Many who write on jazz improvisation acknowledge Attali's insight yet disagree with his pronouncement of the death of free jazz. Indeed, journals like "*Critical Studies in Improvisation*," have churned out hundreds of scholarly articles inspired by Attali's book. However, the majority of these, as well as books by prominent jazz writers like Corbett (1994), refutes his claim that free jazz has lost its ability to free humankind.

I've encountered many examples of the liberating effects of free jazz by reading interviews of jazz musicians who are part of the free jazz movement. One common theme seems to be the incorporation of different musical genres- a pastiche, to borrow a term from Jameson - into ideomatic jazz structures in an attempt to construct the plane of immanence referred to by Deleuze and Guattari. Moreover, their discussion of the plane of immanence would seem to negate the idea of the musical genius who



spontaneously creates fantastic music out of nowhere. In other words it isn't magic or divine intervention that creates an athletic or musical genius. These people are made, not born...my apologies to all the athletes and musicians who interpret their talent as a God given gift! And yet with all this hard work there is still no guarantee the free jazz musician will create something of value let alone one that is unencumbered by the hegemonic demands of the culture (and tainted by that culture) in which it occurs. Indeed, the British free jazz musician Evan Parker (1994) states:

Sometimes...it's as predictable as addition, you get exactly what you expect, other times it's entirely unpredictable. For example, if...you have two basic rhythm patterns happening across the two hands-and then superimpose a related but different pattern of articulation from the tongue, you get a final result that is very hard to predict-because there's a three-layer process of filtering that might throw up patterns of accented notes which you couldn't think up (p. 83).

The free jazz musician is a believer in autonomous art that in the end can never be autonomous. Perhaps this is the lie the musician tells herself in order to play. I would argue that since its inception jazz has been a semi-autonomous art that must believe in an autonomy that in reality can never be achieved. Given this necessary paradox, one must acknowledge the contributions made by people like Adorno (1978) (2002), and some of the other critical theorists described by Martin Jay (1973), as they attempted to understand art and hegemony. In reference to the Frankfurt school in general and Adorno's concept of culture in particular, Benzer (2011) has written that "...Culture could not be understood, as Adorno put it, 'in terms of itself'..." (p. 80). Adorno saw popular music (and for him jazz was part of popular music) as serving the needs of the culture

industry. Their needs can range from promoting a specific political agenda to making a profit to helping the masses find relief through distraction. While Adorno correctly interpreted that some of the music had become colonized, and in some cases sanitized, for white audiences (creating the sacred without the profane) or simply had become derivative, he missed what had been created by improvisation that was truly great.

Adorno (1978) wrote that

The ideological function of jazz when it first asserted itself as the upper bourgeois form of contemporary vulgar music was to conceal the commodity character and alienated manner of production of this music; it was to be offered under the trademark of ‘quality goods.’ Jazz was to evoke the appearance of improvisational freedom and immediacy in the sphere of light music (p. 162).

Adorno’s claim (2011) was that “Improvisations became ‘normalized’ the boys can only swing it in a narrow framework” (p. 101). To be sure, when Armstrong codified jazz music the other musicians who tried to play like him perhaps did create music that only appeared improvisational, as Adorno claims. I would suggest that the improvisational freedom Adorno found lacking in jazz music, specifically its ability to move beyond the commodity character, can be found in some of Armstrong’s 1920’s recordings like “Potato Head Blues,” or “West End Blues.” Armstrong’s brilliant obbligato at the beginning of this latter piece was his critique on music that only serves as an opiate for the masses. Moreover, this obbligato is an important example of one of the ways an artist can overcome Adorno’s “commodity character” and dwell in what De Certeau (1984) argues as “...the art of being in between...” (p. 30). De Certeau is referring to the skill of a North African immigrant in Paris to survive and possibly thrive despite the obstacles of

the constraining order. Indeed, as a poor Black youth in the roughest neighborhood of “Jim Crow” New Orleans, Armstrong surely honed his skills in figuring out how to “make do.” I have no doubt these skills in improvisation of place transferred to Armstrong’s music, especially his early work, given his oeuvre. These skills are perhaps the reason he was able to as De Certeau (1984) writes, “...find *ways of using* the constraining order of place where he has no choice but to live and which lays down its law for him, he establishes within it a degree of plurality and creativity. By an art of being in between, he draws unexpected results from his situation” (p. 30). I would argue that Armstrong’s music is as serious as the music Adorno holds in high praise, such as that created by Schoenberg or Hindemith. Indeed, Armstrong’s improvised obbligato, combining elements of Western and non-Western music such as African and Caribbean, represents not only a “degree of plurality and creativity” but a rupture of the musical fabric which contributed to the vitality of all popular twentieth century music.

Adorno’s claim regarding jazz rings mostly true as jazz music became more mainstream. In some cases this meant white musicians playing, for the most part, poor facsimiles of jazz music. It didn’t swing and it had been depleted of all its sexual energy and anger. It lacked a foreshadowing of tension. For example, just listen to any recording by either the Paul Whiteman orchestra (except for the solos of Jack Teagarden or Bix Beiderbecke) or Bob Crosby’s (brother to Bing) group. In fact Bob Crosby was so square that musicians, that is to say jazz musicians, would say “Bob Crosby’s in the house,” if they were holding marijuana and a cop walked by. Similarly, Pat Boone was the “answer” to record companies in the 1950’s who wanted the money of the baby boomers but didn’t want to incur the wrath of their parents. And Black musicians during the

1930's and 1940's had their music suffer when they paid attention to the financial needs of the recording industry. Adorno (1978) and Attali (1999) rightly criticized the impact of commodity concerns yet even within these constraints I would suggest that some of the better musicians were able to break free and play what they wanted. In fact when records were able to record twenty minutes of music per side rather than the two to three minutes of the 78 era, musicians were better able to expand their musical vocabulary and make more serious, complex music. These records would influence scores of later musicians- Benjamin's criticism of mechanical reproduction, or Adorno's criticism of commodity constraints, notwithstanding. Indeed, in Martin Jay's (1993) study of Horkheimer he writes,

One might still call for a deliberately engaged political act of the kind that Brecht or Hans Eisler advocated, but the meager impact of attempts to apply their ideas in the 1960's suggests the limits of this approach... The culture industry may well be not as totalitarian as Horkheimer and Adorno assumed in their bleaker moments. But whether it allows more than pockets of what one commentator has called 'artificial negativity' remains to be seen (p. 380).

The issue is whether or not these pockets of protest are enough. Given the output of the jazz community I would say perhaps. But it is sobering to reflect on the fact that jazz is no longer mainstream. What kind of impact can it have if only serves a small percentage of the population? Perhaps this is why Gumbrecht explores popular sports. If we were to find harbingers of a utopian society to come, or an avenue that lets us be more fully human, it probably makes more sense to examine an aspect of popular culture that resonates for more people.

## CHAPTER 3

### IMPROVISATION AND THE DESIRE FOR THE IMPOSSIBLE

It's not easy to improvise. It's the most difficult thing to do. Even when one improvises in front of a camera or a microphone, one ventriloquizes or leaves another to speak in one's place...the schema and languages that are already there. There are already a great number of prescriptions that are prescribed in our memory and in our culture. All the names are already pre-programmed. It's already the names that inhibit our ability to ever really improvise. One can't say whatever one wants. One is obliged more or less to re-produce the stereotypical discourse. And so I believe in improvisation. And I fight for improvisation, but always with the belief that it's impossible. And there where there is improvisation I am not able to see myself. I am blind to myself. And it's what I will see...no...I won't see it. It's for others to see. The one who is improvised here, no I won't ever see him. (Derrida, unpublished interview, 1982)

For personal and professional reasons, Derrida's thoughts on improvisation intrigue me. His pronouncement regarding the impossibility of improvisation would seem strange to a participant or "player" who found themselves caught up in the popularity of improvisational theatre during the last half century, although Derrida would probably applaud their continued efforts. And yet his understanding of the impossibility of improvisation should find resonance in those who write about improvisation as it is practiced in the theatre, and by musicians who perform jazz music – an arena where others use improvisation as a way to create. For many, practice in improvisation has the potential to enable us to respond more creatively and individually to an ever changing

present and help us create more accurate meanings either about ourselves as individuals or society at large- instead of uncritically accepting those values from the past as if they had the power of universal applicability. Unfortunately, more often than not, it fails to accomplish this task and those who either perform through improvisation, write about it, or both, often get caught up in the obstacles (and there are many) in achieving true improvisation, and eventually dispose of it. But this is a mistake. These practitioners disregard an important way to see things in a new way. They play it safe and simply repeat what has worked in the past. “If it ain’t broke don’t fix it!” Indeed. More unfortunate is the fact that institutions that claim to cultivate knowledge do not encourage their students or teachers to engage in activities that are similar to what jazz artists and improvisation players do, instead they hide behind those activities which are safe and more appropriate to a classroom setting. For now, I would like to explore some of the obstacles to improvisation as it relates to Derrida’s idea of impossibility.

To quote one of my favorite characters, “Omar Little,” from an extremely well written show produced for HBO, *The Wire*, “Those Greek myths are deep.” I’ll examine why *The Wire* is important in chapter 3 as I discuss Constance Penley’s (1997) NASA/TREK. For now, I would like to let Omar’s profound observation regarding Greek Myths return us to the impossibility of improvisation. Indeed, for somewhere in the nexus between Echo and Narcissus is where Art (in its mimetic sense) and spontaneity (in its Romantic sense) exists. In this space lie the source and products of improvisation and its goal - the recovery of the Self, which I will explore in my last chapter. Often the inspiration to improvise can be structural or referential. For jazz musicians the structure can be as simple as verse-chorus-verse, a thirty two bar blues, or more often, rhythm: the

steady beat of drums and bass that frame a tune and the shifts in rhythm that inspire, perhaps by forcing, soloists to create within many constraints, such as the thirty two bars which constitute the song. The reference is often a popular song or part of one. In improvisational theatre the “structure” can be one of hundreds of games all designed to allow the players a chance to play and create; and the reference is typically extracted from popular culture or everyday speech- a culture by the way that has insinuated itself into the marrow of our thoughts. This is one of the things Derrida is referring to when he argues that improvisation is impossible. For him far too many of the ingredients of an attempt at spontaneity had been created before and by someone else. In this sense they prevent the individual from *autonomous* improvisation because the product and process of that creation lacks complete originality. Perhaps the lack of complete originality is okay? In an interview (1997) with free jazz legend, Ornette Coleman in July of 1997 before and during a three concert series by Coleman, Derrida writes that,

Perhaps you will agree with me on the fact that the very concept of improvisation verges upon reading, since what we often understand by improvisation is the creation of something new, yet something which doesn't exclude the pre-written framework that makes it possible...there is repetition, in the work, that is intrinsic to the initial creation-that which compromises or complicates the concept of improvisation. Repetition is already in improvisation: thus when people want to trap you between improvisation and the pre-written, they are wrong (p. 322-323).

It would appear from the above statement that Derrida is agreeing with Berliner (1994), who writes, “In the final analysis, the spontaneous and arranged elements of jazz presentations continually cross-fertilize and revitalize one another...” (p. 35), and Bailey

(1993) as they, and the countless musicians interviewed, proclaim improvisational music as the combination of something new with something old, without the Derridean problematic of the need for its impossibility. Sara Ramshaw, (2008) in *Time Out of Time: Derrida, Cixous, Improvisation*, helps explain the Derridean paradox of impossibility in this manner: “Improvisation takes place. One time alone. Out of time. And yet absolutely of the time, in tune with time. Creating its own time...Derrida reads improvisation as an impossibility that is only ever possible as the impossible...” (p. 162). Ramshaw’s reasoning is that the improvised piece is appreciated after the fact, and in the moment of creation, by using “...pre-existing or prevailing laws of language, music and temporality...” (p. 163), yet importantly, the very thing that is appreciated in time is something that can only exist and be created out of time. Indeed, Ramshaw further writes and quotes Derrida, “...Impossibility is thus not the opposite of possibility; instead it is ‘the condition or chance of the possible’. In Derridean terms, ‘possible’ and ‘impossible’ say the same thing” (p. 163). Thus, like Derrida I fight for the impossibility of improvisation for to give in and focus on the non-Derridean possible would limit the results. I agree in the impossibility of complete originality but I would argue that the attempt to produce something original is worthwhile in and of itself and occasionally the product might be something really special. The use of pre-conceived structures and the incorporation, for example, of an aspect of popular culture need not negate the improvisational moment as defined by Derrida. Indeed, this spontaneous and conscious effort should be consistently promoted because of the possibility of achieving that truly creative moment or breakthrough, and because of the growth potential it affords the individual.



At times, “... the very predicaments brought on by a limited field of play, or by frustrating circumstances, often ignite the essential surprises that we later look back on as creativity” (Nachmanovitch, 1990, p. 86). Indeed, improvisational jazz music was the aesthetic product of an oppressed people who were forced to improvise to survive as involuntary participants in the colonization of the New World. In contrast, improvisational theater was in large part a white, male, middle class, intellectual jab at the conformity and bourgeois culture of the 1950s. Thus, we have two different art forms born from frustrating circumstances albeit the former saw more actual suffering than the latter. Yet, despite, or perhaps because of those struggles and lack of struggles, each group created an aesthetic that helped define who they were and where they wanted to go.

So what happened? Why do actors produce scenes that are stale or filled with stereotypes that constrain rather than uplift; and why are musicians either incapable or unwilling to find their own voice? Why do they rely on clichés? And why do actors reproduce the status quo? In her study of improvisational comedy, Amy Seham (2001) writes that “Because popular culture is the source of most improvisers’ references, these stereotypes are repeated and revalidated by audience laughter and recognition” (p. 103). I would argue that it isn’t the reference to popular culture or the use of clichés per se that is the problem. Instead, it is the way in which those clichés or popular culture references are used by the actors. An un-appropriated reference can reify the status quo unless the actor is adept at interrogation and a kind of dramatic inversion occurs that makes it very clear that the stereotypes are being critiqued, and not supported. At times, it is the conscious or perhaps unconscious decision of the musician or actor -when faced with the dilemma of coming up with something wonderful right away- to please an audience that

is easily pleased- repeats something that has worked in the past while not adding anything new to it. In some cases it is artistic peer pressure, and the consumer instincts of the audience as consumer which constrain the improviser and prevent her from creating something new. In this case it is an overreliance on Echo and a denial of the individual self. Echo is the accepted canon. It is what has been approved by the gatekeepers. The self is never completely free of the canon but does have the ability to alter that canon either in rearrangement of the vocabulary or the rare occurrence when a revolutionary discovery has been made. Or the reverse can occur and the scene or musical event can devolve into overt displays of narcissism in which case the player or performer becomes blind to all that is around him. This is unfortunate but at times the audience will accept technical skill alone as enough despite the fact that communication between the group and the individual performer stops. The self is not enriched despite its vigorous appearance.

As I read Seham (2001) I partially agree with her as she and I lament bad audiences, their reliance on tainted popular culture and the impact that has on improvisational actors. And yet, Rancière forces me to reconsider a position which posits enlightened performers and bad audiences, for example His insight requires a different definition of “aesthetics” and the “politics of aesthetics” (p. 59). Rancière differentiates his version from that of the modernist, postmodernist and the “aesthetic of the sublime” (p. 61) as he explains why an “aesthetic break” occurred that created a gap between performer and spectator. He begins with his definition of *mimesis* and his admonishment to us for believing “...the photography of some atrocity will mobilize us against injustice...” (p. 61), as he writes of *mimesis*:

the concordance between the complex of sensory signs through which the process of *poiesis* is displayed and the complex of the forms of perception and emotion through which it is felt and understood...there was a language of natural signs, there was a continuity between the intrinsic consistency...of the play and its capacity to produce ethical effects in the minds of the spectators...The stage, the audience and the world were comprised in one and the same continuum (p. 60-61).

In other words Rancière (2009) might suggest to Seham (2001) that she is placing too much faith in improvisational theatre to change the audience for the better simply by virtue of what is *represented in* the art. Indeed, as Rancière (2009) writes in *The Emancipated Spectator*, he might remind Seham (2001) to read Rousseau's *Letter to D'Alembert on the Theatre*, so she can learn how he, "...questioned the supposedly direct line from the performance of the actors on the stage to its effects on the minds of the spectators to their behavior outside the theatre..." (p. 61). In fact what happened on those improvisational stages bolsters Rousseau's and Rancière's claim regarding the inaccuracy of *mimesis* because when the actors tried to enlighten their audiences they failed. And at times, realizing that failure, failed again when they started sensing what the audience "liked," through their off the cuff suggestions, and their reactions to the scenes.

Consequently, they geared the scenes to give the audience what they seemed to want and in the end blamed the audience for the catastrophe. I, too, as an improvisational actor on countless "stages" blamed them as well. Much of what Seham hoped improvisation would highlight and fix (racism, misogyny, and homophobia, for example) was reproduced and the age old problem that Rancière describes rears its ugly head once

again. In his essay, *Tropological Curriculum studies: Puppets and Statues of Curriculum Quagmires*, Peter Appelbaum (2013) applies a largely Rancièrian view, along with his own and Žižek's, in his cogent analysis of curriculum studies as he describes, "...a traumatic experience. We act on our theology, which includes a faith in the enabling and emancipating potential of education, only to find social reproduction as the accompanying catastrophe. Schooling as enabling is at once probable and impossible..." (p. 83). Regarding the improvisational stages Seham (2001) and I essentially played the part of the schoolmaster hoping to educate the ignorant masses and when that didn't happen we blamed the audience. Applying his position to curriculum studies Appelbaum (2013) complexifies our simple analysis as he re-conceives the Reconceptualization:

Curriculum theorizing carries with it the legacy of Renaissance teaching of rhetoric, which emphasized tactics of metaphor over metonymy and other rhetorical moves; this led to both a narrowed epistemology mutually generative of racist and colonial practices and the accompanying presumption that language itself is a neutral technology, separable from oppressive forms of social practice (p. 96).

In other words, as Appelbaum (2013) interprets Rancière (2009), those of us who think the arts can serve as an automatic way out of the moribund are sadly and frustratingly mistaken, "...condemned to melancholic nostalgia for those moments in our early professional development when theories promised ways out of hell into nirvana" (p. 97). But all is not gloom and doom. In his application of Žižek to curriculum studies Appelbaum (2013) suggests the following:

Rather than manipulate our models, metaphors, and designs for educational encounters, we might find more rewarding the notion that our models, metaphors and designs are names for the chasm they themselves construct, between our imagination and those externalized fetishes we call systems of reproduction and regimes of truth (p. 98).

In an earlier essay Appelbaum (2012) offers another possible way out of the “quagmire.” He writes in *Mathematical Practice as Sculpture of Utopia: Models, Ignorance, and the Emancipated Spectator* that if one wants to avoid a “...pedagogical stance that structures the audience as passive spectators...” (p. 14), one should consider the models of American sculptor, Josiah McElheny and those whose work is similar such as Isamu Noguchi. Appelbaum (2012) argues that these artists, “...use models to create new worlds, imaginary spaces of learning outside of time and space. The models become ‘proposals’-invitations to come and play and explore ideas...” (p. 16). Appelbaum is careful to differentiate these models from those which would, “...drag us down into realms of accuracy, correctness, and explanation...” (p. 16). I like this idea despite Appelbaum’s own admission that it might seem “grandiose,” (p. 18) to apply “...theories of social change for school mathematics” (p. 18). Appelbaum’s description of Noguchi’s model for a UN playground reminds me of the improv game I talk about in chapter 6, known as the “Harold.” If done carefully, this improv game creates not so much a scene, but a spark, for both audience and player, to think about and possibly reimagine what a scene could be. In my experience playing this game it was the worst received by player and audience. I’ll take up Appelbaum’s (2012) insights regarding Noguchi’s model and

its further connections to the “Harold” in chapter 6 but for now I’d like to continue with some obstacles to improvisation.

I have no recipe for eliminating those chasms referred to by Appelbaum (2013). Clearly there are many obstacles to improvisation. And as I have described they come from within and without. In writing about the high culture of Berlin during the 1920s, J. Moreno (1947) has stated that, “Conditions of high cultural and technological organization coincide alarmingly with increased immobility of thought and action” (p. 40). Moreno sees the modern state as unhealthy to the human condition since it is in the interest of the plutocrats to decrease humankind’s mobility of thought and action. He places high hopes on a ‘theatre of spontaneity’ to counter the poison of the industrial age. In Moreno’s theatre the actor and audience are both integral to the performance. When its utopian ideal is achieved both are enriched by an experience which can only be momentary. Thus, the spontaneous theatre is an on-going process. Moreno anticipated some of the problems that can derail his utopian dream but did not live long enough to see the most egregious: the appropriation of talent by the culture industry working at the behest of market forces and the willingness of the audience to allow this to happen.

Some of the obstacles to improvisation are reactions to time constraints. We see this fairly regularly in jazz musicians and improvisational actors. Ekkehard Jost (1981), a professor of musicology and a musician at the University of Giessen, in Germany states:

If we think of improvisation as both a spontaneous and a conscious (i.e., controlled) translation of musical ideas into motor action... it will be clear that this procedure demands a certain amount of time... the musician... may find himself,

forced to reduce his 'reaction time'; thus he will not think out musical ideas, but will fall back on ideas he has worked out at one time... he plays what 'live under his fingers' (p. 137).

In other words when jazz musicians are having their conversation-especially one that is "up-tempo" - they often feel compelled to react and respond musically as quickly as their fellow musicians passed the musical message to them. While the best players figure out a way to respond well by trusting their intuition with something that makes musical sense and is original, more often than not the skilled musician will respond quickly with something that's musically appropriate but un-original. In a sense he is playing from memory. But it is not solely an aural memory. It is also a physical memory somewhat analogous to the actions of a baseball player when he is attempting to pick up a ground ball he has picked up a thousand times before and throw the runner out at first base. The ballplayer is relying on the physical memory that lives under his hands, arms, and legs; all of which are used in response to the many variables of the game including the present moment. Similarly, the musician is using what lies under his fingers or in other words his technique to hopefully respond to the musical needs of the ensemble. In like manner the improv player might resort to a physical gesture, mimicry, or inject a phrase he has used before because he knows that this type of response has worked before and hopes that it will work again. At times it does, especially with passive audiences that have been nurtured in and expect an environment where risk is something always to be avoided. And like the ballplayer, the musician's or improv actor's *gestalt* is multisensory. The better players, that is to say the ones who seemingly have unlimited things to say, have

the complex kind of consciousness, which I call *extended consciousness* and of which there are many levels and grades, provide the organism with an elaborate sense of self—an identity and a person, you or me, no less—and places that person at a point in individual historical time, richly aware of the lived past and of the anticipated future, and keenly cognizant of the world beside it (Damasio, 1999, p. 16).

Importantly, not all improvisational players have that “extended consciousness” that Damasio is referring to. In fact most do not. When pressed, the less experienced or least accomplished musician or actor will draw from a Rolodex file of riffs, phrases, and various musical or theatrical gestures that have been done many times before, mostly with success. Is it simply that the musician or actor is so concerned with creating a “finished product” that he is willing to forgo the spontaneous moment in exchange for what he thinks is a sure fire crowd pleaser? If this is true then it must be asked why the audience is so easily amused? What would improvisers create if there was no audience other than each other? The short answer is it depends on the company one keeps. Beginning improvisers mistake all instant responses, like laughter, as a sign that they are on the right track; likewise jazz musicians who are technically proficient but without original ideas tend to encourage the proliferation of those very same ideas. In contrast, improvisers in theatre or jazz who are willing to trust their intuition and take a risk always have the potential to create something wonderful and unique because it is a response to the shared and unique present, not a past that was someone else’s experience. Everyone must be trained in creativity, but not through or with a method. Instead, they must have a history of experiencing first-hand the difficulty yet ultimate joy of



responding creatively to a problem or idea. Although it might seem a paradox it is only after rigorous training that a jazz musician can create something truly unique. In their study of musical improvisation Csikszentmihalyi and Rich (1997) arrived at an interesting conclusion following the interview of dozens of accomplished jazz musicians. They argue that “...Only after they internalize a musical idiom, and learn the relevant performance skills, can musicians perform spontaneous variations that can be appreciated, evaluated, and if they are truly exceptional, selected for inclusion in the cannon of performance...” (p. 63). In other words before the spontaneous production of creativity can begin (and this holds true for jazz musicians and improvisational theatre performers) the musician or actor must be so well versed in the vocabulary of either genre that they can access it when necessary and in the process attempt to create something unique and creative. This training is arduous, time consuming, and for many frustrating. Both the actor and musician must develop a critical relationship with the traditions of their fields: the canon must be revered and when appropriate reviled. This is why Derrida argues for the impossibility of improvisation. Yet he fights for it because it is the only way to free a discipline from hegemony and find freedom within hegemony. Ingrid Monson (1996) studies creativity and suggests that the hegemony Derrida fears is perhaps overblown. “I am suggesting that to reject the deconstructionist perspective on speech, voice ...sound is to reject the idea of subjects so overdetermined by hegemonic ideologies that they are unable to speak or take action on their behalf...” (p. 106). She argues that an adequate response to hegemony can be found within the text: Since jazz music is performed the musicians are able to take advantage of the subtle and not so subtle nuances of tone, timbre, volume, and time. These nuances are impossible to fully

notate on the page (read text) and thus creates pockets of freedom for the talented musician. The sounds at their disposal are seemingly infinite and the talented musician makes judicious use of them. Of course who determines if the product is creative? “It is impossible to separate creativity from persuasion...” (p. 46). In other words all creations musical and otherwise must pass the test of a fellow performer or audience. Both groups are steeped to some degree in the tradition and both groups have varying levels of attachment to that tradition. Perhaps what we call style is the ability of the improviser to convince an audience or fellow performer of the rightness of their choice. At this point I would like to examine the process and products of improvisation in jazz and improvisational theatre.

### The Process

The player who improvises works in the moment and yet draws from an arsenal of either learned licks and dominant structures or cultural references that are either verbal or physical. At times they are Echo, repeating the generally accepted truths. Other times they are Narcissus, seemingly so wrapped up in their own head that they see no one and thus, speak to no one. Yet both serve a function for a commodity driven society and this is why this type of production thrives in the industry called entertainment. But it isn't true improvisation and it didn't have to be this way. Indeed, improv as we know it started out as a way for children to make better use of their time by first creating and then inhabiting that spontaneous moment, creating vibrant theatre, and learning about themselves as children living in Chicago during the Depression. Viola Spolin (1986) worked with these children and is important to improvisational theatre, intuition, and creativity because she created a collection of “games” that enabled the player to improvise more freely. Hers' was an attempt to create an organic process that would enable the participant to discover

their self; Spolin created a space where the children could fully communicate with each other and create what was for her legitimate theatre. “Through spontaneity we are reformed into ourselves” (p. 4), is a maxim that was central to her work. Spolin saw firsthand the harmful effects of the Depression and the alienation inherent in the industrial age. Her improv games were an effort to counter their harmful effects and her hopes were that the recovered self would more closely resemble the perfection (although I am uncomfortable with that word) that exists in Nature or God. Spolin and others like her think that there is this perfect structure-some call it Nature others call it God- that is waiting to be tapped into. When an actor or musician is in touch with this structure they have created true art since their creation resembles, or more likely is informed by, the perfection that is Nature or God.

This idea of drawing from the perfection that is God or nature is a holdover from the Enlightenment and has since been challenged by the critical theorists of the Frankfurt School (1973), John Dewey (2005), and post -modern philosophers such as Jacques Derrida (2008), Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe (1994), Jacques Rancière (2009) and John Caputo (2000). They reject metanarrative whatever its origin. At most they admit to a quasi-structure (2000); however there appears to be considerable disagreement regarding the transcendent qualities of this quasi-structure. French philosopher/amateur musician, Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe (1994) argues against the effort to recover the self as part of a continuing effort to connect with a transcendent quasi structure. Instead, he suggests a mimetic process of constructing art that proposes an eradication of the self and he defines mimesis as an, “...absolute vicariousness, carried to the limit...something like an infinity of substitution and *circulation*...the very lapse ‘itself’ of essence” ( p. 116). Lacoue-

Labarthe's ideas of "an infinity of substitution and *circulation*" are very much in line with most jazz musicians. Most tend to argue against a definitive version of a particular song and place more emphasis on the process of creation described by Lacoue-Labarthe, always thinking about the song to come, yet paradoxically knowing this could never happen. Jazz pianist Thelonious Monk perhaps said it best in the film *Straight No Chaser* (1988) when he lashes out at his producer Teo Macero during the recording of an album: "Every time you play you rehearse," he yells. It is impossible and perhaps unwise to create a definitive version of a song and yet the artist seems to always try to do just that. This is the paradox of jazz performance and all musical production for that matter. And this idea does seem to bolster Derrida's idea of impossibility or the impossible possible discussed earlier.

In *Musica Ficta*, Lacoue-Labarthe (1994) explores the impact of Wagner's music on four artists while further developing the ideas he put forth in his book on Mimesis. He elaborates on the paradox of the production of something new when to most the definitive version is already there and writes, "...that Wagner's work left to his posterity[Adorno's] a task every bit impossible as the one left in philosophy by German idealism (Hegel) to its great successors: to continue to pursue what is completed..." (p. 118). Lacoue-Labarthe and Derrida recoil from the notion that an idea, artistic creation, political thought, etc., could be definitive. This is because eventually these "exemplars" become constraining and prevent the democracy to come which is of vital importance to philosophers who interpret art in its connection to politics. In his writing about Derrida, Caputo (2000) writes:

The democracy to come will be marked by justice beyond the law, by equality and freedom beyond fraternity, by an infinite dissymmetry beyond equality, by a friendship beyond the paternalism of the canonical concept of friendship that has contracted democracy to something less than it is, by a friendship which can only be measured by the measurelessness of its gift (p. 63).

Of course, even if we could agree that a definitive version of something can exist, the question regarding its components in and out of time still remains. Indeed, this paradox which surrounds the creation of art as a finished product is the reason why those in improvisational theatre and jazz who pursue creativity seem to place a greater emphasis on the process and not the product. Nachmanovitch (1990) refers to the German word *funktionslust*, and uses its meaning-the pleasure of doing- to bolster his notion of creativity: "...Creativity exists in the searching even more than the finding or being found..." (p. 45). Moreover, despite coming from a different theoretical framework Lacoue-Labarthe (1994) would seem to agree as he writes that, "... the essence of mimesis is not imitation, but production 'in its broadest sense'..." (p. 80). But production does not occur in a vacuum, and this is why the improv performer or jazz player often finds himself in the guise of Echo, repeating musical phrases or verbal catch-phrases, imitating caricatures, or attempting to embody another personae. These are the 'prescriptions' and 'stereotypical discourse' spoken of earlier by Derrida. It is why improvisation in its purest sense is impossible. I would argue, however, that improvisation can still be created despite the fact that the materials at our disposal are often the hand-me-downs of those who came before. Great jazz music and brilliant improvisational scenes have been created by using the ingredients of a dominant

discourse (as Armstrong did with his brilliant obligato to West End Blues) and more often than not these occur because of the tasteful application and reappropriation of the ingredients of that discourse. Of course the problem is who decides what is tasteful or appropriate for the moment. In the translator's preface to *Musica Ficta* (1994), Felicia McCarren tells an anecdote of a time when Lacoue-Labarthe attended one of the last concerts given by the jazz trumpeter, Miles Davis in Paris. Miles had stopped mid-phrase to utter an expletive. While most of the audience interpreted the expletive as non-musical and an interruption to the concert, Lacoue-Labarthe offered a different explanation: "He was working," (p. xiv) explained Lacoue-Labarthe. For Lacoue-Labarthe, Davis was attempting to *continue* his creation and the fact that he looked outside the accepted musical lexicon shows the extreme effort Davis puts in his work (while also serving as a demonstration of how Lacoue-Labarthe understands language and the reading of words and musical notes as text). It is possible that Lacoue-Labarthe would be less forthcoming with praise had a lesser musician without the reputation or technique of Davis attempted the same thing. Indeed, there can be no pleasure in doing if the technique isn't there to some degree. Give an untrained artist the materials to create and you will get a cacophonous mess.

"To create, we need both technique and freedom from technique...we practice until our skills become unconscious" (Nachmanovitch, 1990, p. 73). One of the fundamental tenets of improv is that you have to learn the rules before you can break them. Once again you have to behave like Echo for a while at least until you can begin to discover your own voice. For most this process of discovery comes easier within the practice halls of a theatrical improv class. At some point everyone can speak and attempt

to create a spontaneous conversation. Not surprisingly, most scenes by beginning improv players attempt to recreate the dialogue and action from popular culture but eventually become cacophonous. At this point the inexperienced player panics and seeks a quick exit or end to this type of scene. Experienced players fear cacophony less and the best use it to create some truly wonderful scenes. In contrast inexperienced players view cacophony as something to be avoided so they use more of the bits and pieces that they have observed in the past which have worked. Those attempting to create music, however, face an additional challenge since the inner workings of the instrument must be learned before an echo of a voice let alone an original voice can emerge, and thus entails more practice before a technique can become second nature let alone be discarded. Once technique becomes second nature the player is able to practice improvisation. This improvisation can take many forms: "...Improvising jazz solos does not consist mainly in inventing new licks, but in stringing together learned licks and references in new and appropriate combinations..."(Belgrad, 1998, p. 180). The inventiveness of the artist comes out in the overall gestalt. At times the creation of a new riff is aided by the intentional or unintentional use of a "mistake": a wrong note played and later "justified" is central to spontaneous jazz collaboration. In improvisational theatre, "...Players say that the best scenes often result from unexpected slips that are inventively justified" (Seham, 2001, p. 52). These "mistakes" come from a variety of places but I would argue are crucial to the creation of improvisation.

One of the risks of course in pursuing mistakes is the well-founded fear that the player will be unable to justify it and make it fit as if it was intentional. When the process is viewed solely as a means to a finished product players of both genres are less likely to

take risks. They remain Echo, safe and secure, producing nothing new. Bebop jazz of the 1940s was a conscious decision by the musicians to re-appropriate their music from white bands performing for white audiences. These musicians were willing to forget about the finished product so they could partake in the *funktionslust* that might lead to new things.

“...In bebop the spontaneous articulation of new musical ideas was valued above precision or accuracy...” (Belgrad, 1998, p. 187). Ironically, by the mid-1950s, bebop became codified as the norm for jazz music, yet fortunately most of the major players refused to rest and continued to make new music-sometimes to the chagrin of some critics, musicians, or the public who- once they figure out what they like- want more of the same. The public didn’t understand that their gluttony would eventually lead to the stultification of the music they love. Fortunately, musicians like Ornette Coleman were willing to endure the criticism of the critics, public, and even some fellow musicians. Coleman’s critics saw in his music a repudiation of all that had come before except for those who saw in the new music the same spirit that initially filled early be-bop.

“Coleman is consistent in eliminating the bonds of functional harmony and divisions into bar –patterns. But he holds fast to what could be called the traditional superstructure: the schematic order of theme, solo improvisation and theme, with the tempo remaining constant” (Jost, 1981, p. 139). Coleman’s decision to retain some of the Echo suggests that creativity can exist even while using the ingredients of a previous thing. True, it’s not improvisation in the sense that Derrida hopes for, but perhaps it’s the best we can do. Coleman had to play the music the way he heard it. Or to put it another way he could only be honest about the music he was creating if he was honest and accurate in his musical description of himself, the self, fighting for a place to insert his own voice. But



what is this self? “It is, as we habitually, and lazily say, a matter of influence! But stated more rigorously, mimesis is the effect of the typo-graphy and... of the fundamental ‘insemination’ which at bottom defines the essence of the *paideia* ... and by which we call the ‘subject’...” (Lacoue-Labarthe, 1994, p. 127). Lacoue-Labarthe seems to imply that Coleman must be more than simply the embodiment of everything that has influenced him musical or non-musical since at every point in Coleman’s creation of music he has a choice. And what makes Coleman special is the fact that he can use his music to give voice to this phenomenon, that is to say, to communicate all that he is. It is also apparent that when another musician tries to play like Coleman he inevitably fails or at best give a superficial rendering, since he are not being true to his self. Since we all change, the self must too and this is why music and theatre, if it is attempting to speak for the moment- somewhere between Echo and Narcissus- must continually change too. The alternative is being a victim of cultural hegemony instead of a player who can fight his way out of it and as De Certeau (1984) says “make do.”

### Product

Ultimately all who aspire to produce art, let alone great art, must wrestle with the dilemma of their relationship to tradition and the process by which they produce that art. Some like Nachmanovitch (1990) see spontaneous production as better able to respond to that tradition while simultaneously producing something new and wonderful. They privilege spontaneity as better able to produce or uncover a greater truth. As it turns out this is not the case. Part of the problem is that true spontaneity, often contains a mixture of the new and the old. An additional problem occurs when the individual self attempts to respond to tradition: the self is either ignored and tradition continues; or the

self is privileged to the point where tradition is ignored. For example, in her study of improvisational theater over the past half-century Amy Seham (2001) poses one central question: "... The question must be asked: when the group works as one mind, whose mind is it? How does the seeming rightness, inevitability, and spontaneity of improv mask the unmarked power of hegemony" (p. 65)? Specifically, she wonders why gender stereotypes were promoted by improvisation rather than challenged by it. Seham is disappointed that the promise of improvisation as it was understood informally by its players as a greater path to truth went unfulfilled as improvisation became popular and therefore a marketable commodity in the 1980s. Earlier in this work I offered an explanation to Seham's question through the work of Jacques Rancière (2009) and Peter Appelbaum (2013). A different explanation to her question can be found within one of the rules of improvisation itself-never deny. A player should never deny the reality of the scene. Instead, they are taught to take whatever has been created before and add something to it. It is always "yes and" not "yes but." Those two phrases represent one of the central tenets of improvisation and also reveal one of its major weaknesses, since denial was understood as not refuting what came before. In actuality, as a player I was often part of heated discussions revolving around the definition of denial. Some of the other players and I preferred another definition of denial. We saw it as a denying of the *reality* of the scene. And yet, given the different gazes by the players on that nascent scene it should have been expected that there would be different interpretations of that reality. Accordingly, this definition created contention, but not actual denial. Still, perhaps the more important reason that improvisational theater nurtured rather than challenged gender stereotypes, or race relations, for example, is that the improv player is

tapping into tainted reserves. In effect, they are drinking from a bad well. Seham (2001) writes that, "... most improv-comedy practice demonstrates that spontaneous group creation usually taps into reserves of shared references, received truth, and common knowledge..." (p. xxi). It would seem that the proper relationship to tradition is to interrogate it and evaluate it and try to figure out what to keep and what to throw out. But how does one decide what to keep and what to throw out? In a sense this question is an epistemological problem. Csikszentmihalyi and Rich (1997) write that, "...it is impossible to separate creativity from persuasion..." (p. 46). To be sure the power to persuade is a complex phenomenon. But I would argue that the ability of an actor or musician to persuade an audience or fellow player to accept a new idea is directly related to that player's style. Style deals with tradition and the new delicately in the same way a chef uses ingredients. Just the right amount and you have the perfect dish of gumbo. But make even the slightest error and the sublime is gone. Style is measured and extreme. But the practitioners who have style *know* when the time is right for one or the other. Jackson Pollack had style. Sandy Koufax had style. Charlie Parker had style. George Carlin had style. Style understands tradition and knows the present. It lives in the moment and beyond the moment. Style has an encyclopedic memory and an astute insight into the present. And those who are paying attention know style when they see it. This is the point when they can be persuaded to accept something new and thus change the traditions they keep with them. But of course not everyone is paying attention. Some audiences and performers are too deeply connected to a canon they view as immutable. And once that issue is settled will the performers have the fortitude to withstand the criticisms and hostility when they challenge that canon? Lenny Bruce had style and was able to

persuade many to follow him. But not everyone was persuaded. "...what we call creativity is a phenomenon that is constructed through an interaction between producer and audience. Creativity is not the product of single individuals, but of social systems making judgments' about individuals' products" (Csikszentmihalyi and Rich, 1997, p. 45-46). Ultimately, his critics killed him, albeit indirectly.

Far too often and out of necessity most improv players use the audience as a barometer of what is good or what is bad. Thus, when they laugh or seem to like what's going on in the scene -regardless of whether or not that scene is promoting gender stereotypes or racial prejudice- more than likely the improv players will continue doing whatever has pleased the audience up to that point. Moreover, when a majority of reference points is bad popular culture that is accepted at face value, in a literal sense, the only product that can be produced, the only communication that could take place between player and audience, is a perpetuation of the hegemony that lurks within those reference points.

Bad ingredients produce bad results. Sometimes the ingredients are an un-interrogated popular culture; sometimes it is a repudiation of the Self. In his discussion on the impact of Mahler on the French poet Mallarme Lacoue-Labarthe (1994) writes,"... thus defined it implies the 'elocutionary disappearance of the poet.' It is a work without subject..." (p. 76). Lacoue-Labarthe is concerned of course with the battle between the spoken words of the poet and the impact of music, each vying for communicative supremacy. But he is also concerned with an interesting definition of true art. Lacoue-Labarthe seems to argue that for true art to appear the artist must in effect disappear in some type of structure or in Heidegger's (2001) case a national aesthetic so overpowering

and saturated that any addition of the self would seem superfluous. Paradoxically, one is always striving to create the definitive version of art. But Lacoue-Labarthe (1994) warns us of the danger that can occur when an artist challenges what is taken for definitive. For example, he writes in his book on mimesis that, "... the choice of a representative of mimesis... as being at once everything-and nothing. The *phamarkos*, individual or collective, is always a monster..." (p. 116). In this sense Lacoue-Labarthe and Rancière appear to disagree. Providing some insight, Lacoue-Labarthe (1994) writes that mimesis, "...can only be (that is, 'be') *declination*, *instability*, '*disinstallation*'"(p. 82). In his description of *mimesis*, Lacoue-Labarthe refers to it as a type of "infinite malleability"(p. 115), which Rancière might declare as infinitely problematic. Some good examples of this type of malleability lies in the initial bebop music of the 1940s; the free jazz movement that began in the 1950s; the experiments in improvisation that came out of the University of Chicago in the 1950s, and some current improvisation that works to both stay on the margins and comment on mainstream improvisation-to create the "ironic distance" Caputo (2000) speaks of in his request for a more radical hermeneutics. One of the more interesting groups is called Improv Everywhere and as their name implies they've taken what they do improvisationally outside of the traditional indoor venue to the outdoor stage. They work in and around the New York City area and perform what they term as "pranks," although what they do is much more than that. Their mission is to add fun to what they see as a somewhat drab reality and they encourage the general public, unwittingly of course, to participate in their pranks. One of their pranks was called "The Best Gig Ever." They found a somewhat talented but unpopular band called *Ghosts of Pasha* from Vermont, and found out where they were performing, and sent

about 50 of their players whom they call "agents" to the concert. These agents responded enthusiastically to all the songs and even memorized most of the lyrics, sang along, even made requests. Had they not attended this concert at best the audience would've numbered perhaps two or three people. While their intention was to provide the band with the best concert experience they have ever had things took an unexpected turn when the band found out that the whole thing was contrived. They were angered rather than pleased and saw what Improv Everywhere did as a continuation of the marginalization that was so much of the band members' childhood and indicative of the bands present problems. In a sense pretending to be fans of the band only highlighted the fact that the band lacked a large fan base. *Improv Everywhere* became that annoying kid from high school, who exists to make fun of the weak, open and sensitive. And in some way *Improv Everywhere* became analogous to the well-intentioned curriculum theorist, who in the end reproduced the very thing he was fighting against. Not all of Improv Everywhere's pranks turned out this way but what happened with the *Ghosts of Pasha* is clearly a cautionary tale of what can happen when risk and the pursuit of infinite malleability, despite the best of intentions, collide.

The reason that some jazz music is so good at promoting a seemingly less harmful form of infinite malleability is because jazz music is only indirectly confrontational unlike the previously mentioned efforts by Improv Everywhere. It is also because of what lies within the *raison d'être* of jazz itself: never repeat what's already been done. This ethos prevents humankind's inclination toward definitive versions of art in any form. Jazz always attempts to be about what's coming next, not what's happened before. Yet, it is able to at times achieve this without completely renouncing tradition. In this manner

the jazz tradition specifically and improvisation in general appear close to Derrida's version of improvisation as a possible impossibility. Improvisational jazz dwells somewhere between Echo and Narcissus. Between traditions, as it has been defined by the gatekeepers and something unique- a uniqueness that can't exist because in reality tradition's hold is never completely relinquished. Perhaps jazz is to be applauded for how it balances its relationship between the present and the past and also the way in which it is able to find the sacred within the profane within the context of a secular world? Indeed, in his writings on black culture Michael Eric Dyson (2004) makes an important point: "... with black creative cultures, it's always about the great next... the secular telos that pulls black America forward, even as we reappropriate what has been appropriated and generate the next form of creativity..."(p. 206). For example, in the 1950s, jazz tenor saxophonist Sonny Rollins grew increasingly dissatisfied with himself and the state of jazz in general. He dropped out of the music scene, cleaned up his addiction to heroin, and worked as a janitor. He only got back into the music scene when he felt he had something new to say. Another interpretation of this event is that Rollins figured out a way to balance his own voice against jazz tradition-to find that ironic distance. In this regard Jost (1981) writes: "Rollins takes the opposite path [of Ornette Coleman]. While the inner structures of his music, their melodic and harmonic content, are largely in line with the laws of Fifties' jazz, the overall form of his pieces is permanently open to spontaneous alteration"(p. 139).

## CHAPTER 4

### YOU SHOULDN'T NEED A WEATHERMAN TO KNOW WHICH WAY THE WIND BLOWS: POPULAR CULTURE AND IMPROVISATION

During the Middle Ages as both feudalism and theocracy waned, and played less of a part in most people's lives, local folk traditions began to blossom. As Bakhtin (1984) describes these folk traditions he writes, "... The cultural folk humor that had been shaped during many centuries and that had defended the people's creativity in non-official forms, in verbal expression or spectacle, could now rise to the high level of literature and ideology and fertilize it..."(p. 72). The richness and rawness of these folk traditions would ignite and provide the material for the "high art" most closely associated with the Renaissance; however this is not the only reason for their importance. For Bakhtin, these folk traditions entertained, nurtured individual and group identity, and perhaps, even provided an outlet for political and other types of authoritarian discontent. Yet this creative outlet was changed by the industrial and post-industrial revolution. Art and play in their many forms became commodified and discontent became, at times constrained within the grooves of a pop song. The industrial revolution created an epistemology of certainty, while temporarily taking the creative process out of the hands of the very people who needed to participate in that creative process. Unfortunately, this certainty also promoted the rigid distinctions between "high art" and "low art", "experts" and "amateurs" keeping them separate and thus robbing each of their ability to influence the other. Moreover, as Lyotard (1984) has written in his essay on the postmodern condition: "...the central question is becoming who will have access to the information these machines must have in storage to guarantee that the right decisions are made. Access to data is...the prerogative of experts of all stripes. The ruling class is and will



continue to be the class of decision makers...” (p. 14). Keeping the “experts” at bay, placing them in their ivory towers, and forcing them to be financially accountable to the major corporations is as destructive to them as it is to the people who lack not only the access these experts possess but the means to become an “expert”. I would suggest that a lack of access to information in the post-industrial age prevents a critical analysis of the processes and products of the postmodern era while also maintaining that epistemology of certainty mentioned earlier.

To be sure it is problematic to describe art as “high” or “low”. Art as both product and process is fluid and it is difficult to pinpoint where elements that were once considered “low” first began to influence art considered “high” and vice versa. For now, I will continue to explore two aesthetic experiences, jazz music and improvisational comedy, in an attempt to flesh out their connection to popular culture, and their ability to serve as a model for praxis. As I have mentioned, my reasons for this choice are personal and academic. For years I performed improvisational comedy in the evening while teaching history at a public high school during the day. At my day job I am part of a rigid hierarchy, a worker on an assembly line. My job is to dispense information –certified by “experts at the top”- to students who are only differentiated in their ability to soak in that information. At night I was part of an alleged ensemble of comedic performers. Our primary task was to make the audience laugh. The latitude in which we went about this task and the necessary interaction that took place between the players and the audience created an aesthetic experience very different from my day job. Instead of suffering from the literalness associated with education in the public schools, the players and audience were part of a collective with the potential to gain experience in and the expectation of

evaluation, interpretation, and ironic distance. And for better and worse much of our fodder for play came from popular culture. What is important in the relationship between popular culture, the players, and audience? When we were at our best the players and audience were able to transform even the most insipid elements from popular culture. At our worst we simply recreated the banality that comprises most popular culture. We as consumers of popular culture became consumed by it. In contrast to a place such as Disneyland, an icon of popular culture, where "...amusement is the commodified negation of play" (Kuenz, J., Willis, S., Waldrep, S., & Fish, S. 1995, p.185), when we were at our best, the players and audience at those improvisational performances were, engaged in play in its fullest sense, creating our own amusement, and at times, transforming the banal to entertainment of the highest order, but in reality what we created went beyond mere entertainment. Indeed, this type of play-a serious play- is very different from the type usually associated with toys or amusements such as Disneyland, for these represent a false type of play. In this sense, Roland Barthes (1972) writes, "... Faced with this world of faithful and complicated objects, the child can only identify himself as owner, as user, never as creator; he does not invent the world, he uses it: there are, prepared for him, actions without adventure, without wonder, without joy"(p 53-54).

I bring up Barthes' condemnation of toys and others and my condemnation of amusements such as Disneyland in order to suggest that what we need are not amusements or toys ready made for us that limit our interaction and thus our ability to be part of the world. Instead, we need to overcome the alienation that comes with our commodified culture. To do that we need an aesthetic experience that can help us become part of the world; an experience that will enable us to move beyond that Cartesian split

between mind and body; an experience that will make us present; not present as in the response to a roll call, but present in the world. This type of presence will help us challenge the notion of “expert” and create a knowledge base that is fluid, and open-ended. It will help us cultivate an attitude that gives us the freedom to deviate, fluidity, and innovation.

I would argue that a site for us to gain this presence is in the realm of popular culture, while keeping in mind that popular culture is not homogeneous; its products exist at the margins and the mainstream. Yet, it is important that we keep an eye and an ear on both for as cultural scholar Stuart Hall (1996) has reminded us, “...It is for this reason that what is socially peripheral is so frequently symbolically central...” (p. 471). When jazz music began, for example, its creators were clearly on the periphery of American society, yet what they proposed was critical for the development of our nation. Many writers on jazz music have commented how this original music, composed of an amalgam of cultural influences, created an aesthetic that enabled those who made and listened to this music, to understand and at times challenge their place in American society. For those in the mainstream who would listen could be found an important critique. Indeed, it is not a coincidence that when jazz music first became codified in the 1920’s Jim Crow and Klan membership were at their height.

It would seem paradoxical that a culture industry, tainted by unequal power relationships, sexism, racism, consumerism, homophobia, etc., could serve as a site for praxis. Indeed, much has been written by critics of the culture industry, Adorno (2002) and more recently Jacques Attali (1999), which link the aforementioned problems within that culture industry. Still, in his study of the Frankfurt School, Martin Jay (1973)

informs us that unlike Adorno and Horkheimer who dismissed popular culture, “...Kracauer was optimistic about the disruptive, oppositional potential in film, whose realistic capacities he particularly praised. As an avant-garde in Burger’s sense, he was highly sympathetic to the threat this new mass medium posed to the aesthetic hierarchies of traditional culture...” (p. 373). And of course there is Walter Benjamin (2007), who in his famous essay on *Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* argued that some of the art of the modern era had the ability to destroy the “aura” surrounding “high” art and thus challenge the destructive hegemony previously noted. It is well known of Adorno’s disdain for popular culture, preferring the “high art” of Berg, Schoenberg, or Hindemith. I would argue, however, that the type of praxis Adorno finds in the compositions by Berg, for example and the kind of praxis Attali sought but did not find in free jazz can be found in some of our popular culture and the way in which some jazz musicians and improvisational theatre players incorporate that material. The important point to note here is that in order to achieve this praxis one must exert effort. There are no nuggets of universal truth waiting to be scooped up and applied like a balm without the necessary interpretation and mediation. This is why much of the vitality of jazz music is due in part to the musician’s willingness to incorporate elements from popular culture and her ability to take full advantage of the moment in which that music is created, but more on that later.

What are the advantages of popular culture as a site for praxis? Jason Earle (2000) has written that for one thing, “...Popular culture texts provide the dominant means of communicating knowledge to the general public in a postmodern society...” (p. 121). The issue of course is how these texts are received and/or incorporated into new aesthetic

products. In other words, are they taken uncritically, within a non-aporetic stance thereby perpetuating the very problems mentioned at the top of this essay or are they processed with an ironic distance? Are they merely a diversion from the struggles of daily life or a site where those problems can be critically assessed? In their introduction to a collection of essays that find value in popular culture yet acknowledge its ambiguities, Toby Dasgupt and John Weaver (2000) have written, "...We view all popular culture texts as inscribed within a history and culture that is shaped by capitalism, consumerism, choice ideologies, white supremacy, sexism, and homophobia..."(p. xxvii). In other words, all cultural texts are in part artifacts from a society where power is unevenly held. That is except for the ones touted as free of those maladies by Adorno. Assuming he is correct about his highly praised art, Adorno would prefer to spend time with cultural artifacts that contain within them a dialectic that mediates society's ills. Instead, popular culture requires the participant to engage with that text and provide the critique from outside of that popular text. As the great jazz bassist and composer Charles Mingus has stated, "You have to improvise on something." Thus, why not improvise on a text that reaches more people and leaves open room for iteration? Instead of the wholesale denunciation of popular culture by the Frankfurt School and those who maintain a curatorial aspect of culture, instead of a narrow-minded academic elite that rigidly adheres to an established canon, I propose that we interrogate popular culture as an addition to the established canon, with the hope of eventually tweaking that canon and in some cases blowing it up. I further suggest that improvisational comedy, as created and performed in the latter half of the twentieth century, and jazz music, from its inception at the beginning of the twentieth century through free jazz, are two aesthetic models that can demonstrate the advantages

of interacting with popular culture, while simultaneously serving as a product of popular culture, both at the margins and at the mainstream. The salient feature of improvisational comedy and jazz music is the mandate within each not to repeat what has gone before. In this way jazz music and improvisational comedy avoids the risk of maintaining an established canon (despite the fact that there are museum curators within each) and thus create an epistemology that promotes one way of doing things.

Jason Earle (2000) points out another advantage of interrogating popular culture instead of texts that promote only an empirical approach when he writes:

Instructional research texts seek to embody an instrumental rationality that is oriented towards focusing on the means rather than a discussion of valued future ends...a key feature of the entertainment-oriented texts of popular culture are that they offer ‘the image of something better to escape into, or something that we want deeply that our day to day lives [doesn’t] provide’ (p. 127).

The instrumental rationality Earle speaks of is certainly desirable to those who view educators as neutral dispensers of objective information that is timeless in its quality and truth quotient. Like many in Curriculum studies, Earle is frustrated with a pedagogy that takes it for granted that we all want the same objectives and all we really need is a tried and true method to get us there. Is it possible for us to engage with these “entertainment oriented texts” and avoid becoming “technologically enframed” (Heidegger 1977, p. 144) as Heidegger has previously warned? In regards to a critical musicality that would promote the kind of criticality this essay is partially focused on, Heidegger (1977) seems to imply the possibility as long as those who engage with the music “engage with ‘decisive confrontation’ in its reflection upon technology” (p. 144). Heidegger's notion of

decisive confrontation as a means of escaping from the pitfalls of instrumentalism can be realized within some of the best of popular culture as we examine the way in which that popular culture had been created and also because of what popular culture represents: at its best popular culture can promote a collective intelligence. This collective intelligence is a consequence of several aspects of popular culture: the first is its ability to shock. The shock could be the result of vulgarity, or it could be the result of what Bakhtin (1984) has described as the grotesque. Prominent British theater director Peter Brook (2008) has described one of the primary advantages of shocking both the actor and the spectator. He argues that it creates within the actor and the spectator a greater awareness of the instant as he writes, "... As shocks and surprises make a dent in the spectator's reflections, so that he is suddenly more open, more alert, more awake, the possibility and the responsibility arise from onlooker and performer alike. The instant must be used, but how, what for" (p 56)? It would seem that Brook is using what Rancière (2009) refers to as an "intricate dramaturgy of sin and redemption" (p. 7). Rancière is chiding the producer of this type of theatre and likens it to the attempt made by the "schoolmaster" who uses a similar approach to reduce the distance between himself, the enlightened one, and the "ignoramus." Indeed, Rancière is concerned with the collective intelligence of the spectators, however he disagrees with the theatrical producer or writer, for example, who would argue that they can change the *level* of that collective intelligence by simply exposing the ignorant audience to an enlightened play. He writes, "...The distance the ignoramus has to cover is not the gulf between her ignorance and the schoolmaster's knowledge. It is simply the path from what she already knows to what she does not yet know, but which she can learn just as she has learnt the rest..." (Rancière, 2009, p. 10-

11). Taking Rancière's argument seriously the instant is perhaps best attended to by an improvisational approach, because at that moment all who are active bring forth their knowledge, life experiences, and their individual take on the situation, without the mediation of the "schoolmaster." But patience is required. And for those who claim a moral imperative, patience is at times in short supply. Indeed, to continue the Rancièrian metaphor he writes further that the schoolmaster, "...does not teach his pupils his knowledge, but orders them to venture into the forest of things and signs, to say what they have seen and what they think of what they have seen..." (2009, p. 11) For in that moment, when they are at their best, are small versions of the utopias sought by the previously mentioned members of the Frankfurt School, and Bakhtin for example. To be sure the moment is often squandered or not completely perceived and used. Perhaps the best we can hope for is a brief respite from the alienation of a commodified culture? Daspit and Weaver (2000) remind us of an important point made by Dick Hebdige: "... As Hebdige reveals counter cultures or subcultures form 'up in the space between surveillance and the evasion of surveillance' and are neither simply affirmation or refusal, neither 'commercial exploitation nor genuine revolt'" (p xxi). Indeed, in this sense, we need to reevaluate the thought that marginalized or dominant groups are homogeneous and separate. And we must reexamine the taken for granted notion that subversion only exists in the margins, and the more important likelihood that it doesn't exist at all. For example De Certeau (1984) writes that

Marginality is today no longer limited to minority groups, but is rather massive and pervasive; this cultural activity of the non-producers of culture, an activity that is unsigned, unreadable, and unsymbolized, remains the only one possible for



all those who nevertheless buy and pay for the showy products through which a productivist economy articulates itself. Marginality is becoming universal. A marginal group has now become the silent majority (p. xvii).

### The Creative Moment

Since I am concerned with the possibility of the purely spontaneous moment within the nascent creative moment, it might be of some value to examine a sub-genre in jazz that many who play and write about it claim to find the most spontaneity. In my research I've encountered many examples of the seemingly liberating characteristics of free jazz by reading interviews of jazz musicians who are part of the free jazz movement (1993). One common theme seems to be the incorporation of different musical genres- a pastiche, to borrow a term from Frederic Jameson- into ideomatic jazz structures ( the jazz canon) that seem to be an attempt to construct the "plane of immanence" referred to by Deleuze and Guattari (1994) . And as I read about some of the best aspects of popular culture and improvisational theatre, I find a similarity in the way the players construct their "plane of immanence" to take advantage of the moment discovered even as parts of that moment seem to escape them as the players attempt to grab on. Perhaps this immense difficulty partially explains a fairly well known profane comment from Lou Donaldson, an alto sax player of the bebop variety who said in the film, *Blue Note- A Story of Modern Jazz* (1997), "This shit is hard to play." And yet with all this hard work there is still no guarantee the free jazz musician, for example, will create something of value let alone one that is unencumbered by the boundaries of the culture in which it occurs. Indeed, the British free jazz musician Evan Parker states in Bailey (1994):

We were looking to extend the range of timbres available and to balance the overt virtuosity that was central to our instrumental approach at the time with another type of playing approach. We wanted some sounds which weren't associated with instrumental improvisation. (p. 94).

Parker is unique among musicians in that he understands the dilemma posed by a variety of theorists who study creative moments within an aesthetic practice. Most free jazz musicians and those in the theatre seem to view art as autonomous. I would argue that since its inception jazz and theatre, even those that profess to be improvised, are a semi-autonomous art.

Indeed, it's certainly encouraging to read curriculum scholars like Ted Aoki (2005), for example, who found in improvisation a way to "...move beyond the hold of instrumentalism of curriculum implementation" (p. 370). For Aoki the benefits of improvisation became apparent during the course of a visit from the jazz trumpeter Bobby Shew. Upon reflecting on that visit Aoki writes,

And why improvisation? I told him that in education, and in curriculum particularly, under the hold of technological rationality, we have become so production oriented that the ends – means paradigm *a* way to do, has become *the* way to do, indifferent to differences in the lived world of teachers and students. Could improvisation be a way to create spaces to allow differences to show through (p. 368)?

As curriculum scholars like Marla Morris (2009) have commented there needs to be more analysis of music as part of an arts based inquiry. In her book *On Not Being Able to Play* Morris has written, "As against Nietzsche, I suggest that music is not immediate.

Like other forms of expression, it is a form of mediation that must be processed through the ear and thought. For some people this processing fails and they suffer from tone deafness...” (p. 232). What is interesting to me is the different ways in which musicians and actors experience this mediation. At times it’s a genuine struggle, a race against the clock because both your fellow players and audience are waiting for you to play the right note at the right time, right now (and of course variations exist on what that looks or sounds like). Or say or do something on the stage of improvisational theatre, that if not capable of justifying the entire scene, is at least capable of making what came before make sense. In order to hit that note or add just the right thing to that scene requires a lot: One must be able to tap into the tradition of jazz or theatre, understanding that as a player you are part of a continuum. While mastery of many of the tenets of that tradition is required, mastery is not enough. At some point you have to say something new. This is that rupture in time that Derrida has written about. One must add to the ongoing conversation, with a statement of sorts that seems to incorporate the past, anticipate the future, and perhaps briefly occupy a space beyond linear time. In other words there must be innovation. But if innovation occurs one must be open to the possibility of breaking with a good bit of that tradition. This is hard. The audience will at times fight you since some of them are there to hear the same thing that touched them on your record or the last time they saw you live. Improv players who develop characters, especially those with signature lines the audience remembers, are thus encouraged to perform those characters, saying those lines, again and again. This is not to say that there can’t be good work done with characters that have appeared on the stage before. There can. But for this to happen there must be continual reassessment and hopefully revelation. And for this to occur (and

remember you can't force it) the moment must be understood and realized by players and audience. This creates a space for revelation, not a guarantee that it will happen. Most of the time the best one can hope for is a reasonable attempt at getting the craft right. In almost two decades on the improvisational stage as a player I can remember only a handful of revelations. They came and went so quickly if you blinked you probably missed it. The first time one of those wonderful moments happened to me I was still a relatively new player. I had maybe a year or two of stage work behind me. We were performing a relatively easy game called "expert panel." I was one of three "experts". The "subjects" of our expertise were given to us by the audience. Another player served as the host of the show, fielding questions from the audience and guiding the discussion on stage. While I can't recall the questions asked or the answers I gave I distinctly remember feeling completely relaxed. Secure in my character and in my ensemble. We had each other's backs! Inexplicably, one of the answers I gave resonated with the audience and seemed to come out of nowhere. And it was at that moment that I understood one of the attractions to improvisation- that is the creative moment that seems to come not from a place of struggle, but rather from a place of calm. It just seems to flow from you without any effort. Despite this brief revelation my personal struggles on the improv stage have been frequent. In twenty years of working either directly or indirectly with improvisational theatre I can only recall a handful of times when the right words and bodily actions came to me right away. Don't get me wrong, I'm not suggesting that the only advantage of improvisation is when it seems to happen with little effort. I certainly understand, however, the desire by many to be able to create without appearing to exert so much effort. Perhaps when those things do happen we should think of them as

happy accidents. And who knows maybe the reason they appear to occur so easily is because of the struggles that had taken place at an earlier time: A time where the real work begins.

### Krazy Kat

I learned about this comic strip from Gilbert Seldes (1957) who describes it in his book, *The 7 Lively Arts*. Seldes has written about popular culture around the same time as some members of the Frankfurt School were alerting us to the insidious hegemony contained within that culture. Remarkably, Seldes was able to select an assortment of “entertainment of a high order” from places not typically associated with art. Moreover, his selections seem to defy the warnings of the Frankfurt School who prefer only the right art and tend to find it in the usual places-theatre, painting, opera, and symphonies. George Herriman conceived Krazy Kat, the comic strip. He was a Creole from New Orleans whose family left the area shortly after the white authorities declared Creoles to be black and no longer white. And not wanting to test out the separate but unequal facilities of the Jim Crow South the Herriman family split to California. Seldes has written that, “...Krazy Kat, the daily comic strip of George Herriman is, to me, the most amusing and fantastic and satisfactory work of art produced in America to-day...” (p. 207). I might be biased but I take Seldes’ suggestions regarding popular culture seriously. His pronouncements and analysis seems to be right on the mark. But don’t take my word. ee cummings, Walt Disney, and Bill Watterson who created Calvin and Hobbes cite Krazy Kat as a major influence on them. I find it interesting that the creator of this comic was an insider who became an outsider because of the convoluted logic of whites who responded to modernity through the nostalgia of a racist past. I also find it interesting that this

masterpiece of a comic was created seemingly by accident. Herriman was working on a comic called *The Family Upstairs* (1957) and had some empty space in the panels. Rather than leave them blank he started drawing some of the characters that would eventually become the ones in *Krazy Kat* in the blank spaces of the *Family Upstairs*. Importantly, these new characters were not merely there to fill up space. They were a commentary on the goings on in the *Family Upstairs* that eventually became so profound they commanded a strip of their own. I should point out that the *Simpsons* started in much the same way: as an ironic commentary to the *Tracey Ulman Show*. I would suggest that Herriman, in his creation of *Krazy Kat*, was doing the same thing great jazz and improv players do when they play with their material: first they reevaluate then they reveal. Seldes writes: “The theme is greater than the plot. John Alden Carpenter has pointed out in the brilliant little forward to his ballet, that *Krazy Kat* is a combination of *Parsifal* and *Don Quixote*, the perfect fool and the perfect knight. Ignatz is *Sancho Panza* and, I should say, *Lucifer*...” (p. 210-211). And he also states, “...It happens that in America irony and fantasy are practiced in the major arts by only one or two men, producing high-class trash; and Mr. Herriman, working in a despised medium, without an atom of pretentiousness, is day after day producing something essentially fine...” (p. 207).

It is to Herriman’s credit that he was able to produce art of a high order within a despised medium and it is to Seldes’ (1957) credit that his discerning eye can spot high art in lowly places like the comic strip and slapstick film: Seldes is careful to differentiate the slapstick of Buster Keaton, Harold Lloyd, and Charlie Chaplin, the latter of whom he holds in the highest regard, with slapstick that only bore a superficial resemblance to the aforementioned artists. In his analysis of Chaplin, Seldes importantly points out that

when Chaplin began as a player in the Keystone Comedies his talent quickly surpassed that of his fellow players. Indeed, Seldes (1957) writes,

It was there that he first detached himself from life and began to live in another world, with a specific rhythm of his own, as if the pulse-beat in him changed and was twice or half as fast as those who surrounded him. He created then that trajectory across the screen which is absolutely his own line of movement (p. 36-37).

Like the previously mentioned Louis Armstrong, Chaplin honed his many skills through the kind of careful observation that can only occur because he was able to create a temporary distance from the goings on around him. Chaplin's comedic genius, at times conceived through improvisation, manifested itself as "...the world intruded with all its natural crassness upon his detached existence..." (Seldes 1957, p. 38). Seldes writes about Chaplin's improvisational prowess in one of his earlier films entitled, *His Night Out* (p. 38). In one scene, Chaplin and another actor, Ben Turpin, are playing drunk and expectedly stumbling down the street. Turpin's character starts acting as policeman and grabs Chaplin by the collar, yet with no clear destination in sight. At one point, as Chaplin is still being dragged by Turpin, Chaplin falls flat on the ground. While being dragged in this position Chaplin reaches out and grabs a daisy and as Seldes writes:

The function of that gesture was to make everything that went before, and everything that came after, seem funnier; and it succeeded by creating another, incongruous image out of the picture before our eyes. The entire world, a moment earlier, had been aslant and distorted and wholly male; it righted itself suddenly and created a soft idyll of tenderness. Nearly everything of Charlie is in that

moment, and I know no better way to express its elusive quality than to say that as I sat watching the film a second time, about two hours later, the repetition of the gesture came with all the effect of surprise, although I had been wondering whether he could do it so perfectly again (p. 396).

Seldes argues that Chaplin's gesture made everything that came before and after funnier. While I agree, I would also argue that Chaplin's gesture made everything that came before seem right and everything after possible. In that one improvisational gesture, Chaplin became the equivalent of that great jazz musician(s), theatrical improviser(s), student(s) engaged in the process of creating, or classroom teacher(s), who has listened and incorporated and understood everything that has come before and accurately responded to it as the perfect ensemble player, aware of and part of that nascent moment of creation. In this way Chaplin's gesture validates everything that has been done in the film up to that point, even the "mistakes," and sets up the rest of the film's successful drama to come.

Perhaps it is possible to avoid the complicated elitism of Adorno or for a more recent example, the narrow-minded elitism of Wynton Marsalis, the director of the Lincoln Center Jazz Orchestra, when it comes to expanding the scope of a particular artistic medium. No one working in the early twentieth century could have imagined that "entertainment of the highest order" could have emerged from the lowly comic strip or the Keystone Comedies. Like much of popular culture most of it is at best mildly entertaining preferring instead to reaffirm and thus reify traditional notions of gender relations, heteronormativity, and white reign, for example. When I first became aware of improvisational theatre I had high hopes. We were part of a talented ensemble and we



had an audience that was willing to pay to see us three nights a week. Admittedly most of the players overlooked the political aspect of their work and instead focused on improving as a comedic player. And that meant for many jockeying for position on the stage to see who could get to the funny first and most often. In other words the audience was there to see comedic improv and the players would try their best not to disappoint. For whatever reason, perhaps my background in history, or a smattering of political protests, I became aware that we could also use our performances as a platform to make a point. For example, at times any scene was automatically funny because it contained a flamboyant gay male character. We were laughing at him as the audience seemed to enjoy their reaffirmation of heteronormativity. But occasionally, the player on stage and probably the audience as well were able to interrogate that notion so the gay character was no longer the punch line of the joke. Unfortunately, those occasions were rare. Why is this so? In her book, *whose improv is it anyway? beyond second city*, (2001) Amy Seham studied the last half-century worth of improv to discover why something with the potential to be so liberating became so oppressive. She was especially concerned that the few women who were able to garner stage time more often than not wound up reifying traditional gender roles rather than shattering them as she thought they would.

More often than not female improvisers create scenes that reinforce traditional gender stereotypes. For those who challenge this position it... is considered inappropriate to the agreement based work at improv Olympic and is certainly seen as an inhibitor to the collective achievements and organic truths of the zone. Yet any real challenge to society and status quo requires conscious thought and the deconstruction of normative values (p.68).

In other words if a female player wishes to challenge traditional gender stereotypes, for example, she would not only have to go against an audience that seemingly approves of the stereotypes but against her fellow players on stage. She would have to deny the intentions of the group. This of course cannot happen since the primary rule of improvisation is to never deny. In other words, the female improviser was coerced by consensus as to how to mold a character that adheres to accepted norms. A second reason Seham found for the reinforcement of traditional gender roles came when she investigated the common source of knowledge for players and audience: "... Because popular culture is the source of most improviser's references, these stereotypes are repeated and revalidated by audience laughter and recognition..." (p. 103). For most improvisers laughter is the ultimate goal. And to reference Heidegger, the source of that laughter has been kept in stored reserve waiting to be unleashed at the right moment. Part of the problem is the audience and player's limited knowledge base. This is why in all my time on stage our best show was in front of a Mensa convention. My least favorite show was performed in front of five hundred drunken Shriners and their stripper dates. But in each case where nothing wonderful happens in front of a general audience, both the players and the audience were either unwilling or unable to move beyond the classic cultural touchstones. Unlike Gilbert Seldes, they were unable to choose wisely because they were too willing to allow others to choose for them.

#### Flawed Mythologies: The Spectator and the Public Sphere

Contemporary mythologies have let us down and we are partially to blame. Instead of accepting, working with, or creating the modern equivalents of ancient

mythologies or medieval festivals- with their complex ambiguities and paradoxical contradictions- contemporary society has mostly squandered their opportunity to understand their experience and shape their society for the better. To be sure there are many forces at work that have created this condition. Much of the blame can be placed in the sphere of corporate America and the unholy alliance they have forged with the mass media. Yet, part of the blame rests with us. Our fears and desires foreground some mythologies or parts of mythologies, at the expense of others and cause us to confuse the literal with the symbolic. In turn, our rigid adherence to these flawed mythologies nurtures irrationality and stupidity at the expense of reason and fact. For example in his examination of creationism, intelligent design, and evolution, Kenneth Miller (1999) writes: "Membership in any number of creationist organizations required the applicants to sign a statement attesting to the literal, historical truth of Scripture. A large chunk of their time and effort was devoted to defending the biblical account of creation, and even today creationists lead boat trips down the Grand Canyon of the Colorado..." (p. 40). And while we are willing to participate and accept symbolic mythologies as the literal truth most of us are unwilling to participate in and form the mythologies that make up our everyday experiences.

For now I will discuss the role of the mythic. I will also discuss the mythic component of cult phenomenon *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* and briefly discuss the phenomenon of fan culture. These topics certainly merit individual attention. I lump them together because they represent an attempt-albeit flawed- by people to mold their own mythologies rather than accept the ones that have been mass produced for them. Unfortunately, these sparse attempts at liberation will fail to unseat traditional norms or

offer a better alternative. Perhaps this is why Grossberg asks, during his discussion with philosopher Stuart Hall (1996), “...how is it that the very freedom of civil and cultural institutions from direct political intervention results in the rearticulation of the already dominant structures of meaning and power” (p. 161)? Hall’s theory of popular culture is positioned somewhere between orthodox Marxism and Structuralism (Post). Indeed, his theories provide a reasonable explanation as to how the spectator winds up relinquishing his dialogic responsibilities so that he may fulfill the needs of industrial and post-industrial corporate culture.

It wasn’t always like this. Prior to the industrial revolution and the bourgeois culture that followed, people participated in the creation, distribution, and reception of their own stories and public festivals. “Human beings used to be influenced primarily by the stories of our particular tribe or community, not by the stories that are mass produced and market driven...”(Kilbourne, 2002, p. 56). These stories and festivals had a direct connection to the needs, fears, and uncertainties of a tribe or community. While they offered no guarantee of a solution to a variety of problems, or an easy explanation of their experience, the complexity and inherent contradictions of these stories and festivals had the potential to disturb the status quo (generally a good thing) and create the conditions for a better alternative. For example in Europe, during the waning years of the Middle Ages feudalism lost its authority to politically organize society in favor of monarchism (granted, it is debatable whether or not monarchism was an improvement), the political status quo was disrupted by the public and unofficial festival, and the conditions were produced for the emergence of the Renaissance and the de-legitimation of feudalism. “...The marketplace feast opposed the protective, timeless stability, the unchanging

established order and ideology, and stressed the element of change and renewal” (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 81). Unfortunately, the market place feast was unable to satisfy the needs and fears of Medieval Europe. Death from war or plague informed their needs of survival in the here and now and the afterlife. These needs were ultimately filled by the Church and Monarchy. Clearly, disrupting the status quo and providing a reasonable alternative are two very different things.

Still, the marketplace feast and the carnivalesque atmosphere that ensued was an important part of medieval society because for better or worse it was the *honest expression* of people living in medieval society. Gilbert Seldes (1957), while writing about the arts of the early 20th century, also stressed the honest expression of people and in fact was concerned that, “...the ‘intellectual’s’ appreciation of the popular artist might make him, in turn try to win the favor of the intellectuals and fatally deprive him of the common touch...” (p. 93). Indeed, for Bakhtin (1984):

The carnivalesque crowd in the marketplace or in the streets is not merely a crowd. It is the people as a whole, but organized *in their own way*, the way of the people. It is outside of and contrary to all existing forms of the coercive socioeconomic and political organization, which is suspended for the time of the festivity (p. 255).

The festival was a way to briefly experience life unfettered, apart from the rules of society. It combined elements of the sacred and the profane. And yes it wasn’t always pretty. Thus an official response to the ugly side of life was to ignore it, repress it and try to contain it, re-direct its energies, or chalk it up to the work of the Devil. Clearly a more sophisticated analysis is needed since “...The essence of the grotesque is precisely to

present a contradictory and double-faced fullness of life...” Bakhtin, 1984, p. 62). How are we to truly understand who and what we really are if we refuse to acknowledge all that we are capable of, both good and bad?

As the modern era ushered in new forms of mechanical reproduction through two different yet similar mediums-film and television- the potential to create more complex mythologies increased. Ideally, these mythologies would forge a powerful partnership between “spectator” and “story.” The modern myth brings to the table unique visual and aural components, each with the ability to seduce, alter time, transmit, and inspire an assortment of values and ideas. Cultural theorists like Benjamin (2007) and Williams (1989), who wrote about film and television respectively, were hopeful that these mediums would aid humankind in creating a better society. Indeed, Williams saw television as one of “...the contemporary tools of the long revolution towards an educated and participatory democracy...” (p. 151). Television and film would serve the public by informing, entertaining, and most importantly, forcing a “viewing” that is active. A new type of public sphere would be created in which the spectator (in our case the television watcher and filmgoer) and the image (film and television as contemporary mediums for myths) would inform each other. In other words it was never preordained that television and film would become the tools and the grease of corporate America. In reference to television Williams writes, “...the technology of transmission and reception developed before the content...” (p. 29) Television was a blank slate. It had the potential to do all of the things referred to by Williams and helps create the stories that are similar to the ones produced during an earlier time period, yet this time with the added benefit of increased distribution and more complex content. Likewise film had the potential to mindfully

entertain, educate, and transform an American public who for the most part were engaged in the complimentary activities of the progressive era during the first two decades of the twentieth century. Admittedly there remains a lack of consensus regarding the nature and purpose of the progressive movement. Still, most historians would agree that more democracy was a goal of the general public at all levels of government. And that democracy would be had only when government changed the nature of its relationship with big business. This relationship did change during the first two decades of the twentieth century. Yet by the beginning of the 1920's corporate America was poised to produce and hopefully sell a lot of product. The public relations expertise that was perfected by George Creel during World War I to disseminate propaganda and limit free speech would be applied to the relationship between the consumer and producer. Indeed, the idealism that existed prior to and during the progressive era would be either crushed by the war experience or coopted by the newly formed, but experienced and large, advertising machine. This is perhaps why film was ultimately unable to rekindle the idealism of that earlier period. Writing on the films of that era Miriam Hansen (1991) maintains that "...the scopophilic transgression of boundaries enacts a practical critique of historical demarcations of public and private-the possibility of bringing hitherto unrepresented discourse of experience into the view of a radically inclusive, heterosocial public sphere" (p. 41). As millions of immigrants poured in from Eastern and Southern Europe and as hundreds of thousands of African Americans moved from the rural south to the urban and industrializing north an increasingly heterogeneous public could only benefit from films that forced them to reconsider racial, ethnic, and gender norms. Instead, sophisticated and yet to be famous filmmaker D.W. Griffith succumbed to the

fears and prejudices of white society; he played into the American public's reluctance to embrace the ontology of German historiography as a paradigm of Truth; and hid behind the first amendment with his release of *Birth of a Nation* and promotion of *Intolerance* (1916). In effect, Griffith's approach to film structure was regressive since he borrowed from the narrative form of the bourgeois novel of the nineteenth century and established this form as the dominant model for film. In her study of Griffith and that era Hansen writes, "...Besides establishing Griffith's reputation as the artistic 'genius' of the industry, the film marks a point of no return both in economic terms and in terms of public discourse on the cinema" (p. 163). Films were big business to be sure but more importantly Hansen argues that the acceptance of *Birth* as a paradigm of Truth reflected America's odd relationship with empiricism and nurtured the types of myths that would occupy the public realm while serving as an arbiter of Truth. Part of the problem rests on the acceptance of one position over the other. I would argue that despite the irrationality of mythical stories (and the widespread acceptance of films like *Birth*) at their core myths contain real issues, obscured by a symbolic referent, which people are trying to grapple with. Unfortunately, the scientists, intellectuals, and general public were unsuccessful in dealing with the issue of race at the time of the release of *Birth* because of flawed science. For example, the dominant science of that era concluded that intelligence was a function of race. This is one example of many why those who embrace a rational, empirical approach should try to "see" through the irrational (people are often reluctant to confront the real issues directly) part of the mythic if only to re-visit the taken-for-granted "Truth" which emerged from bad science.



It is a shame that the potential Benjamin and Hansen discovered in early film rarely lived up to their expectations and hopes. For Hansen the films of the silent era and the theatres in which they were shown “shaped a mode of reception,” and often “emphasized the presentness” (p. 43) in which the typical filmgoer found herself. How far might humankind have progressed if this activity was allowed to continue? Similarly, Benjamin saw the opportunity for human growth through the medium of film since in film, “...a different nature opens itself to the camera than opens to the naked eye-if only because an unconsciously penetrated space is substituted for a space consciously explored by man...”(Benjamin, 2007, p. 236-237). Film, thus, had the potential to create a vibrant, albeit ambiguous mythical experience similar to those that existed during the time of the ancient Greeks or during the medieval period referenced by Bakhtin, but now *augmented* by mechanical reproduction. For Bakhtin it was the very tension of those ambiguities that lay the epistemological groundwork which helped usher in the Renaissance. True, the film destroyed auras. But as Hansen and Kluge (1991) have argued, it produced new auratic experiences (Hansen). Unfortunately these experiences have been tempered or completely coopted by the needs of corporate America.

In spite of the grip held by corporate America on the media occasionally a work is produced that retains the invigorating elements of ancient myth, the thoughts and concerns of the common people, and the rejuvenating effects of grotesque realism previously described by Bakhtin. It can be found in what has been termed the cult film. Paradoxically existing on the margins yet also displaying both financial and critical success, the cult film is exactly the type of film experience seemingly referred to and hoped for by Benjamin and Hansen. Indeed, commenting on Benjamin’s and Kracauer’s

position that the film spectator saw the film with her mind and body, Sobchack (1996) has argued that the power of film was based on "...the medium's essential ability to stimulate us physiologically and sensually..." (p. 55). Released in England in 1973 and brought to the United States in 1975 *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* was and still is a film that draws its *participants* (I use this term over audience on purpose) because of the strength of its presentation, its effective use of a variety of mythic elements, and its ability to stimulate its audience "physiologically and sensually." Perhaps this is why Stuart Hall (1996), when commenting on popular culture in general, argued that, "the arena where we find who we really are...is an arena that is profoundly mythic" (p.479). Of course figuring out who we really are and accepting what we find are two very different things. The carnivalesque sensuality of *Rocky Horror* postulated an ambiguous sexual orientation at odds with the way the majority of Americans viewed their sexuality in the 1970's. The discomfort many Americans felt and still feel toward homosexuality, for example, practically assured *Rocky Horror* its marginal status and midnight showing. While those in the mainstream might relegate the appeal of *Rocky Horror* to the eccentricities of youth I would argue that the appeal of this film lay elsewhere. At its core the film is critical of the institution of marriage and heterosexuality as the written-in-stone standard of sexual relationships. Importantly, the film is able to overcome the resistance of the audience to different forms of sexual expression not by didactic text but by exploiting the sensual aspect of the medium, transvestism, and resurrecting Dionysus. These are the elements that form the attraction. The lead character Dr. Frank N Furter (played by the actor Tim Curry) doesn't persuade the lost couple to try alternative sexuality (Brad and Janet played by Barry Bostwick and Susan Sarandon, respectively)

through conventional, rational, dialogue. Rather, it is a filmic seduction made all the more powerful through the Dionysian connection. And as the participant's proxy Brad and Janet allow the viewer/ participant to be seduced as well. *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* employs a pastiche of mythical and carnivalesque elements that help explain the success of the film, seduce its audience, and challenge conventional notions of gender and sexuality.

Indeed, in reference to Bakhtin, Hall (1996) argues that "The carnivalesque is not simply an upturning of two things which remain locked within their oppositional frameworks; it is also cross-cut by what Bakhtin calls the dialogic" (p. 470). In this way *Rocky Horror* works as an act of resistance and creates an alternative public space for the filmmaker and filmgoer to work out their sexual ambiguities in the safe environment of a mythical, late night, non-judgmental "feature show." Certainly part of the allure of *Rocky Horror* is the in your face sexuality, camp and kitsch that make up so much of the film. But of course for some, "Being in 'bad taste' can be, as Pierre Bourdieu points out in *Inside the Mouse*, "an act of resistance..." (p. 3). Released only three years after the Stonewall Uprising, *Rocky Horror* speaks to the discontent and anger felt by many in the gay community. The filmmakers might be criticized for taking an indirect approach in expressing their anger and for creating a film in bad taste. For example there is an act of cannibalism in the film. Perhaps a literal example of bad taste, but that criticism misses the point. There is always a place for rational dialogue. But rational arguments formed within specific political, social, and economic contexts can only get you so far. The many scientists, for example, who argued for the legitimization of eugenics as a means to justify the racial status quo of the early twentieth century, were rational men of science. The

psychiatrists who concluded that homosexuality was a psychological disorder up into the early 1970's were rational men and women of science. And the pharmaceutical industry perpetuates and empirically justifies addiction for millions all in the name of rational science!

Every so often empiricism needs to be stirred up. People can and should demand better science. But most people however are not going to get the chance to work within science to make these demands. But they might get the opportunity to critique science specifically and empiricism in general by exposure to or participation with the arts. Of course there is the claim that the arts can manipulate? Consider Rousseau's (1968) argument toward the arts. While channeling Plato he warned: "The harm for which the theatre is reproached is not precisely that of inspiring criminal passions but of disposing the soul to feelings which are too tender and which are later satisfied at the expense of virtue..." (p. 51). In the end Rousseau and Plato did not trust the public to weave their way through the miasma of myth and reality. I certainly understand their trepidation. Griffith's *Birth* stoked the flames of white supremacy and legitimated the institution of Jim Crow rather than begin the dialogue and hard work called for by intellectuals like DuBois. The problem isn't so much the film as it is the reception of the film. Griffith wanted to be a filmmaker to a large audience. "... While it is true that commercial art is always in danger of ending up as a prostitute, it is equally true that noncommercial art is always in danger of ending up as an old maid..." (Panofsky, 1995, p.120). Instead of interpreting the film as an excuse to begin a dialogue on race the strength of its narrative structure seemed to make all future discussion unnecessary. Myth and reality became fused and the truth about race relations and race lay buried. On more than one occasion I

have felt frustrated by the masses inability to differentiate myth from reality. But is it right to place all of the blame on the myth? Should Leni Riefenstahl have been tried at Nuremburg for crimes against humanity because of her film, *Triumph of the Will*?

Humankind's ability to answer the difficult questions concerning who we are and what is our place in the world will not be enhanced by avoiding the mythic. The mythic must be directly confronted but then rationally analyzed. "...The adherents of the cult of the Rocky Horror Picture Show transform themselves into the characters, and especially into Frank, by singing the songs and especially by donning his mask" (Aviram, 2004, p. 185). Thus, at times it is not enough to simply discuss the issues. How could my college roommate refute the criticism of his parents toward his sexual orientation when they bolstered their argument with psychiatric proof? He couldn't. But what he can do is hope that one day the certainty his parents have in science might be lessened. Not to dismiss science outright, but to demand better science. The strength of the mythic is not in its ability to offer easy solutions to complex problems. Rather, its strength is the result of the contradictory nature of the well-constructed myth and the questions it would raise because of those tensions. *Rocky* is a modern day myth and as Aviram (2004) argues Frank is Dionysus. "The adherent suffers the effects of Dionysus paradoxically as both a liberation and an enslavement to the lovely but tyrannical god..." (p. 184). It was liberating to dress up as a transvestite, challenge gender norms, and sexual orientation. Yet, there is no guarantee that the participant in this bacchanal would be able to liberate himself from the constraints of gender and sexual norms while also negotiating the tyranny of pleasure. The audiences of the mid 1970's could not anticipate the AIDS crisis of the 1980's. With penicillin in hand to combat the STD's of the 1970's they and the

filmmakers focused on the pleasure aspect of Dionysus while ignoring the political and social ramifications that were part of the myth as well. But the myth is not to blame. The problem is in the misinterpretation of the myth that was a result of the mythmaking being coopted by corporate America who are experts at manipulating fears and redirecting dissent. Consequently, the masses were prone to foreground some aspects of the myth at the expense of others, confuse the symbolic with the literal, and ignore or de-emphasize the rational.

From the time of Valentino and Gish, film helped humankind dispense with the need for rational discussion; it exploited their voyeuristic tendencies, and stroked their heightened pleasure receptors. *Rocky*'s liberal use of transvestism strongly challenged gender norms and importantly positioned ambiguity into gender constructs that most people accepted as scientific fact: "...This dualistic desire is characteristic of the ambiguity at work in male drag performance: at once the female impersonator submits to the cinematic representation of woman by donning her image; however, given the ultimate power held by the male performer, he is also able to take control of women's image through the drag performance" (Robbins, Myrick, 2010, p. 271). Liberation from stultifying gender and sexual norms is achieved for those who fully take part in the *Rocky Horror* ritual. This liberation, however, is limited since man maintains his control of woman's image. Tim Curry is simply Faye Wray dressed in an outfit by Fredericks of Hollywood. The message is clear: Women can expand the realm of their sexuality as long as they are wearing fishnets and a bustier! This is one of the flaws of the *Rocky Horror* myth. The other more important flaw is the introduction of Apollo to the story in the guise of Riff-Raff, Frank-N-Furter's henchman. In his essay on *Rocky Horror* Aviram

(2004) writes, “And Apollo, of course, is placed both by Greek tradition and especially Friedrich Nietzsche as the antithesis of Dionysus. Hence it is he and his sister who restore to the audience the distinction between Transylvania and earthling and bring about the end of the drama” (p. 189). Rather than sustain the myth the filmmakers chose a device to end the plot and the myth which in turn eliminated all ambiguities. Why this occurred is unclear. Perhaps they didn’t trust the audience to create their own distinction between myth and reality. Or to look at the problem inverted, Rancière (2009) might argue

There is the distance between artist and spectator, but there is also the distance inherent in the performance itself, in so far as it subsists, as a spectacle, an autonomous thing, between the idea of the artist and the sensation or comprehension of the spectator...In the logic of emancipation...there is always a third thing...that is owned by no one, whose meaning is owned by no one, but which subsists between them (p. 14-15).

In other words, even if the filmmakers eliminated the “flaws” pointed out by Aviram (2004) that “third thing” might rear its head and produce an unwanted result.

Perhaps they needed a simple plot device, one especially that had already been accepted by movie audiences. Are Rousseau, Plato, and Bloom therefore correct? Did the filmmakers consider themselves the experts whose job it is to interpret and make sense of experience? I don’t know. The one thing I can say is that the filmmakers were confident in their contention that traditional heterosexual marriage and sexual relations within that institution need to be reexamined as the only standard by which men and women interact with each other. Also, it is to the filmmakers’ credit that they were able to recognize the at times destructive male gaze that informed the sexual escapades of the

film. But as Robbins and Myrick (2010) have pointed out, “This penetrative control is ultimately manifested as the RKO broadcasting tower which acts as the center of meaning for the film, a sadistic impulse the film recognized as a potential danger, but beyond which the film cannot move...” (p. 274). Apollo destroyed the source of Frank – N- Furter’s phallic strength when he toppled the RKO tower. Unfortunately, the filmmakers were unable to offer an alternative view and unwilling to let the Dionysian myth play itself out or remain in ambiguity. Perhaps the problem lies in the possibility that mythmakers who exist on the margin simply never had the experience to mold and shape the public sphere.

Indeed, the creation of autonomous art and its distribution has been problematic for quite some time. In his analysis of culture Grossberg (2010) writes, “... culture is never merely a set of practices, technologies or messages, objects whose meaning and identity can be guaranteed by their origin or their intrinsic essences...” (p. 157). Potentially liberating ideas are frequently co-opted by those with power, motivation, and the means to do so. For example, some historians who examined early television of the 1950s refer to that time period as the golden age of television. Serious plays by the likes of Paddy Chayefsky, Horton Foote, and Rod Serling, were broadcast. But so were programs with far less serious pretensions. And it was that type of programming which won out. As Williams (1989) points out television has been handicapped from the very beginning. He writes, “... within the broadcasting model there was this deep contradiction, of centralized transmission and privatized reception...” (p. 30). Learning from their experience with radio, corporate America exploited television’s technical and financial need for centralized transmission, exploited the new mediums incorporation of



imagery with sound to manipulate their audiences to purchase their products. This is why serious programs soon gave way to banal amusements, “the commodified negation of play” (*Inside the Mouse*, 1995, p. 185): corrupt quiz shows, the Mickey Mouse Club, Howdy Doody, Bonanza (a father, three sons, each from a different mother, and a male Chinese housekeeper) and Gunsmoke! Williams (1989) reminds us that, “... broadcasting was developed not only within a capitalist society but specifically by the capitalist manufacturers of the technological apparatus” (p. 34). The genius of the “capitalist manufacturers” was to get the American public to purchase an “apparatus” that in turn would manipulate them to purchase more things. The American public was being groomed to be consumers, not producers of their own mythologies.

Despite commodification, banality and the sheer stupidity of television there will always be programs, like *The Wire* for example, that deserve our attention: Programs such as this one legitimate television because they complexify competing and coincidental forces, and thus require the viewer to interact in order to make meaning. Indeed, the viewer is compelled to make meaning of her own rather than receive one which was pre-packaged. In this way the viewer’s gaze is altered from passive to active. A similar level of activity may occur in response to a heavily commodified program or even one which reifies a societal wrong; however that aesthetic stance would have had to be already present in the viewer. Of course if the American public is to improve its mythmaking and myth interpreting ability; if it is going to fight against a commodified culture it thinks it wants but does not need, then it is going to have to take matters into its own hands. This does happen, but it is rare. For example, in her book *NASA/TREK* Constance Penley (1997) describes how tens of thousands of fans of the television series

Star Trek use the show as inspiration to produce unique, imaginative, and at times pornographic fiction to help them better understand their experiences. Similarly, fans of Bruce Springsteen like to share stories about Bruce because they, "... order and to find friends personal experiences according to socially derived categories and must enable fans to understand their experiences as shared" (Cavicchi, 1998, p. 168). Penley's *NASA/TREK* (1997) concerns the people who write fictions inspired by Star Trek. She tells us these people are called "slashers." Penley writes,

Although the slashers are writing for much smaller audiences – in fact, largely for themselves – their work nonetheless embodies the same impulse as the female nineteenth –century popular novelists: to transform the public sphere by imaginatively demonstrating how it could be improved through making it more answerable to women's interests (p. 134).

The shared experience of Springsteen fans and the activity of Penley's "slashers" are similar in that they both represent informal, collective movements. These movements attempt to understand and possibly change the public sphere. Indeed, while Springsteen fans try to figure out ways to reconcile hard work, low pay and bleak prospects, Penley's "slashers" hope to change a sphere that is either uninterested in women's issues or patriarchal. Slasher fiction is perhaps more effective at illustrating the complex issues which surround and contribute to ill constructed gender norms than traditional academic studies. The impact is immediate! In a similar way, HBO's "fictional" *The Wire*, showed the range of forces, the gestalt, that combine to limit opportunities for the working poor of Baltimore. In both Penley's (1997) analysis of "slasher" fiction and *The Wire* are two attempts to improve the public sphere, even though the former is a fantasy response and

the latter seems more realistic. *Rocky Horror*, *NASA/TREK*, and *The Wire*, for example, demonstrate how the science fiction genre, fan fiction, and good fiction lend itself to the construction of new mythologies that have the potential to transform the public sphere. Because these mythologies are set in a future yet to come, or a dystopian present they are more likely to help those who watch them extricate themselves from the types of cultural constraints and limited meanings referred to earlier by Grossberg (2010). (Ironically when Gene Roddenberry pitched the series to NBC executives he called it a western set in space). Penley's slashers use the Star Trek universe to better understand the sexual and emotional needs of women by sometimes focusing on a homoerotic relationship between two of its lead characters. Also, the Star Trek theme works to challenge gender norms as it pertains to science. As Penley describes, women were better able to withstand the rigors of space travel and had logged more flight time but it was the men who were chosen to be pilots in the space race. It should come as no surprise that when a patriarchal society went looking for "the right stuff" it found it only in male test pilots. Penley's slashers and the fiction they produce are an important example of an act of resistance. So is the activity of the fans of Bruce Springsteen. To be sure it is a fantasy response. Fan culture and some television shows are fantasy responses, but so is much of mythic culture. *Rocky Horror* was a fantasy response and an important act of resistance too since it attempted to force a reassessment of gender and sexuality norms. But because of its flaws *Rocky Horror* did not create an alternative public sphere. Their attempts were marginal at best. Could new media help us create new mythologies? In writing about the current digital age Mark Hansen (2000) writes that, "... the digital image explodes the frame..." (p. 35), but he also maintains "... yet so long as it is tied to the image frame of

the cinema, this polymorphous potential will remain entirely untapped” (p. 35). I’m afraid Mark Hanson is right. He is of course referring to the spectator’s role during the pre-cinematic period and the demands that aesthetic medium had on the participant. Indeed, as filmmakers like Peter Jackson and studios like Pixar become more adept at creating images that allow the spectator to leave the image at the “frame of the cinema” and simply sit back and enjoy the show not only will the potential of digital cinema not be tapped but the ability of the participant to assume an active role in the creation of helpful mythologies will remain untapped as well.

## CHAPTER 5

## PLAYWRITING AS SOLO IMPROVISATION: AN ORIGINAL PLAY

Setting: The time is the near future. The place is a private, for profit, high school. In fact, all of the public schools that were once a feature of America have been replaced by privately run, for profit high schools (The Charter School movement of the early 21<sup>st</sup> century served, in part, as an effective transition to complete and open privatization, after underfunding and over testing unfairly caused a lack of confidence, among the general population, in public schools). One company, Koch Industries, controls and owns ninety-five percent of the schools in America. This same company also controls the energy, pharmaceutical, media, prison, timber, paper, fructose, hydrogenated oil, fertilizer, seed, and law enforcement industries. Monopolies like this one were once a problem, but all anti-trust legislation had been repealed in the Santorum Bill of 2036. A small component of anti-trust legislation remains but only because it can be used as a weapon against labor unions, although few unions still exist.

The schools of the near future have taken on a completely new character from what they once were: Administrators that were once human are now cyborgs, part human, and part machine. This serves their employer well since they are now rendered incapable of free thought or critical thinking of any sort. They are in charge of ensuring that the teachers adhere to the mandated curriculum that was created by Patriot Perspective, a conservative think tank, funded by Koch Industries. Koch Industries had attempted to replace all of the teachers with “teaching drones,” but a loophole discovered by Senator Ben Sanders, (great, great, great, grandson of the late senator , Bernie Sanders) requires a small percentage of teachers to be fully human.

Despite the loophole, the assault on teachers, (as witnessed by the addition of “teaching drones,” the elimination of unions and teacher’s pensions, the elimination of medical insurance, and low salaries), has created a shortage of human teachers, except for a small segment of Christians that see teaching the mandated curriculum as the path to salvation or a way to bring about the End Times (they can never seem to figure that one out). Filling out the human teachers are a small cadre of idealists, who view good teaching as transformative, however they cannot be open about their belief in liberating pedagogy or they will face arrest.

All theists are fundamentalists, and all religions have ended any activities connected to social justice. Consequently, the Social Gospel was repudiated at the Southern Baptist Convention in 2027. Speaking for all faiths they affirmed that Jesus, Muhammad, Abraham, Buddha, Joseph Smith, the Reverend Jim Jones, L. Ron Hubbard, and Jenny McCarthy (who became the patron saint of the anti-vaccine movement) wants them to be wealthy. (It was at this point in the development of Christianity and its relationship with federal and state governments, that it became the established religion of America).

Much of the world’s populations spend most of their time working long hours, while being severely underpaid: Sweden, Finland, Denmark, Germany, Liechtenstein, and Iceland are the only countries that have a middle class majority. A very small percentage

of the world's population is wealthy. Still, in the United States, the majority of white Christians, and whites of other faiths, support a political and economic system that nurtures and idolizes these small, wealthy, ruling elites. Inexplicably, these majority groups consistently vote against their interests, although in actuality voting does very little to effect any significant change, in part a consequence of gerrymandering, Citizens United, no campaign finance laws, and the power of lobbyists. Still, Blacks, Hispanics, Asians, Jews, Atheists and all members of the LGBT community can no longer vote, unless any of the latter group has participated in Christian conversion therapy, or the former pay an exorbitant poll tax. (In fact, the LGBT community was stripped of all civil rights as stipulated in the Cheney Bill, which eventually became the 34<sup>th</sup> amendment to the Constitution).

The average age of the human staff at Koch High 3476.9 (outside of Philadelphia) is sixty-five, although there are a few young teachers in their early twenties. They were selected for their affable manner, team spirit, obedience to authority, and obvious love of their Christian faith. They score high on the battery of standardized tests and observation instruments that evaluate their ability to teach the Curriculum as designed by Patriot Perspective. This Curriculum is touted as "values based." It promotes the "seven core values:" obedience, patriarchy, un-regulated capitalism, white-supremacy, Fundamentalist Christianity, American exceptionalism and heteronormativity. Everyone at the high school, with the exception of the janitors, cooks, bus drivers, maintenance men, human security staff, students permanently in "in school suspension" and lawn maintenance staff, is white.

Main Characters: (The Quintet)

Eugene: fully human, male, early sixties, teacher.

Mark: a male student in his junior year.

Jack: a male student in his junior year.

Hannah: a female student in her junior year

Zoe: a female student in her junior year.

Additional Players:

J. P. Altgeld: prison inmate, arrested and convicted of improper use of his office for his role in pardoning the criminals of the Haymarket Square Riot and a host of other charges.

Mary Harris Jones: prison nurse, arrested and sentenced by a military tribunal for conspiring to murder in the Paint Creek Mine War of West Virginia.

Alex Berkman: prison inmate. Arrested and imprisoned for the attempted murder of Henry Frick.

Galileo: Prison Inmate. Formerly under house arrest, now incarcerated for stealing his middle finger from a display in the Museo Galileo in Florence Italy.

Martin Luther King Jr.: Prison inmate. Convicted of violating an Alabama law from 1921 that made it a crime to boycott a business.

Lenny Bruce: Prison Inmate. Convicted of talking about Eleanor Roosevelt's tits.

Dalton Trumbo: Prison Inmate. Convicted of failing to testify before the HUAC.

H.J. Rosenthal: Prison Inmate. Convicted of selling cocaine to fund the Sandinistas in Nicaragua.

They are often surrounded by an assortment of students, administrators, human teachers and drones, most of whom best remain anonymous.

### Scene One: Personalized Learning

(Interior of a classroom. The students are seated and leashed to their desks. There are forty two students in class. They are arranged in six straight rows, seven deep. A "smartboard" is at the front of the class. The walls are bare, with the exception of six portraits: Charles and David Koch, Richard Nixon, Ronald Reagan, Pat Robertson and the Olsen Twins-who are considered the greatest actors that ever lived (Their television show from the 1980's, "Full House," is played continuously on screens that teachers can access as a "treat" for students when they are finished with their work.). The bookcases and shelves are filled with trophies (there are no books) won by the school for excellence in education. Electronic advertisements selling products and services by Koch Industries, and "PSA's" promoting the seven core values, frequently "*support*" the lessons taught by the teachers. A small camera surrounded by an equally small bullet proof glass dome hangs from the ceiling. No one knows if it records or not, or who is entitled to view the captured images and sound. There are no windows. All of the lighting is fluorescent)

Eugene: (He is standing at the front of the classroom, unenthusiastically delivering the tail end of a lecture on the Founding Fathers he has delivered more times than he cares to remember. The teachers have been "rewarded" by the administrators with a "jeans day," so he is wearing blue jeans. It's Friday, 28<sup>th</sup> period, the last class of the day, and week for that matter. The number of periods per day was increased as an administrative response to the dwindling attention span of students. )

And so, as we all can see, once America rid itself of British tyranny we established the world's best country.

Hannah: Mr. Debs?

Eugene: Yes, Hannah.

Hannah: (She is somewhat nervous, and pauses before speaking) I think I read somewhere that the American freedom fighters had to maintain the institution of slavery so they wouldn't lose the support of the Southern colonies prior to the Revolutionary War?

Student 1 (in a monotone voice) America improved the lives of Africans by rescuing them and paying for their passage to our great country.

Student 2 (in a monotone voice) Hannah, did you read that treasonous liberal pabulum in a book?

Students 1-38 (chanting)) Treasonous liberal pabulum, Treasonous liberal pabulum, (repeats and eventually fades out).

Hannah: (nervous, but steadfast) Yes

Student 2: (Still, using a monotone voice) Was it on the list of approved reading?

Hannah: (attempting to conceal a lie) Of course!

Zoe: (friends with Hannah, and trying to show support) Yes, it was on the list.

Students 1-38 (In unison and in a monotone) Godless African savages thanked America for rescuing them from the jungle, paying for their passage, and delivering them to patriotic, god-fearing Americans, who always had their best interest in mind.

(At that moment one of the cyborg assistant principals enters the classroom. All of the cyborgs look alike and are gender neutral. The students and teachers are required to address all cyborgs as "Mr. Charles" or "Mr. David." The cyborgs do not care which of those two names are used.)

Mr. Charles: (speaking like a large dog given the power of speech for the first time) Nice work students! Mr. Debs! You have embraced the standards!

Eugene: (repeating a phrase he has said to Mr. Charles more times than he cares to remember, while concealing his disgust at what he is about to say) Yes Sir! I strive to ensure the success of all of my students as I deliver to them personalized learning!

(As Mr. Charles exits the classroom, the bell sounds, signaling the end of the school day. The students are un-leashed and leave. Eugene walks to his desk, sits down in his chair, and attempts to muffle a sigh, yet he can do nothing to temper his facial expression.)



## Scene Two: Woodshedding

(It is two days later, Sunday morning. As required by law, everyone in the community is attending a Christian church where people hear the word of god as interpreted by Pat Robertson, considered the most important theologian of all time. The quintet, taking a big risk, is instead inside the back of an abandoned warehouse, (which was once a lawn and garden center before climate change made that activity impossible, except for the wealthy), on the outskirts of the city. Zoe had called everyone the night before, and had asked them to come today because she had a surprise for them. An assortment of unused lawn and garden tools are scattered within the structure. There are three wooden chairs, one armchair, a sofa, a bookcase filled with an assortment of books and a crate turned into a makeshift coffee table, in a back corner of the warehouse. Discarded and reclaimed lamps provide lighting. A small space heater takes the edge off the cold in the winter. Electricity is provided by a small solar collector hidden from sight. Eugene occupies the armchair. Mark and Jack are seated on the sofa. Hannah is straddling one of the wooden chairs, with her forearms leaning against its back. Zoe enters with excitement. She is holding a heavy box which she quickly puts on the crate that is downstage center)

Zoe: Hey! Look at what I scored from the Goodwill last night!

(They gather around a small but sturdy cardboard box while grabbing at its contents)

Mark: Books!

Jack: Old books.

Hannah: (Grabbing a handful) Nietzsche, Dewey, Foucault, Vonnegut, Twain, holy shit Kafka... here's one about Einstein and Picasso! Nice haul my love!

Eugene: (To Zoe) I thought Goodwill stopped selling books years ago, since no one ever bought them?

Zoe: They did. I found these bitches in a gym bag, near a bunch of old exercise equipment.

Eugene: I suppose we should be thankful that most people have given up on either a sound mind or a sound body. I can't believe you were able to buy these.

Zoe: I didn't buy them. They gave them to me!

Eugene: (somewhat incredulous) They gave them to you?

Zoe: Yep, the cashier didn't know how to price them and when she asked the manager he called corporate, but couldn't get a hold of anybody. So, he hung up on them and told me to take them.

Jack: (Highfiving Mark) Yeah man, that's good for us!

Zoe: Gene, what's wrong?

Eugene: (looking serious) Hannah, on Friday you brought up a viewpoint on American slavery that isn't supported by the standards.

Hannah: (defensive and annoyed) I asked a question Gene.

Eugene: Hannah, I don't want to see you get in trouble.

Hannah: (annoyed) Gene, it was a question. The school code states that if we state an unauthorized topic within a question we aren't guilty of breaking the law.

Eugene: Hannah, you know what I mean. All the Borgs need is one excuse to zap us and they'll take it

Zoe: (concerned) Gene, we know you're frustrated too.

Eugene: True

Hannah: Would you prefer we challenge the standards like we've done in the past...non-verbally?

Eugene: No, I'm tired of that approach too... but Hannah, what you did the other day... don't you think you might have gone too far?

Hannah: Maybe a little. I don't know Gene I'm so fucking tired of pretending!

Eugene: I'm tired of pretending too. I'd like to be a real teacher again.

Zoe: But they'll arrest you and you'll lose your job.

Jack: Gene, don't do that to us. You're the only teacher at the school who's not completely full of shit.

Eugene: So, keep pretending to (mockingly) embrace the standards?!

Hannah: (Attempting to change the conversation by reading from a book) Hey guys, check out what Dewey writes, "Writer, composer of music, sculptor, or painter can retrace, during the process of production, what they have previously done. When it is not satisfactory in the undergoing or perceptual phase of experience, they can to some degree start afresh. This retracing is not readily accomplished in the case of architecture—which is perhaps one reason why there are so many ugly buildings."

Jack: (Chuckling) Well, that explains our school.

Zoe: Inside and out. And that goes for their so called (in a mocking tone) educational program of personalized learning that ensures success for every student.

Mark: I'd like to see our educational program (making air quotes) retraced.

Jack: I'd like to see it flushed down the toilet, but fat chance of that happening.

Eugene: (his mood improving) As long as we're here...

Hannah: (To Eugene) I'm right there with you brother! It's my turn to lead our discussion.

Eugene: Go for it!

Zoe: Hold on a second! (She darts offstage and quickly returns with a box of donuts)

Hannah: Alright, I would like to revisit (she sees the donuts at this point, grabs one, lustily bites into it and turns to Zoe) Thanks baby! (Turns to the group, with a mouthful of donut) the New Deal's effect on the building of the welfare state.

Mark: (Without missing a beat makes fun of Hannah talking with her mouth full by speaking as if his mouth is full) FDR didn't go far enough!

Zoe: (Ignoring Mark's joke and focusing the discussion) What makes you say that?

Mark: (Getting serious) Remember that time he closed the banks during the Bank Holiday? When they reopened they were only slightly improved. So much of what made them prone to failure still remained. Roosevelt should have nationalized the banks!

Hannah: There's no way the business interests in Congress would have allowed that. No way!

Jack: FDR said it himself. He was saving capitalism from itself so it could continue. Not paving the way for a socialist economy, despite what Father Coughlin was saying on the radio.

Zoe: Fucking anti-Semite!

Mark and Jack (Simultaneously) He was anti-Semitic?

Zoe: (getting angry at Jack and Mark) Of course he was anti-Semitic; you know he was... we've had this discussion before...just like that motherfucker Ford. Don't you remember, he bought that newspaper, the Dearborn Gazette for the sole purpose of spreading his bullshit!?

Eugene: (Bemused) Americans loved Henry Ford.

Zoe: (angry) Most Americans couldn't find their own assholes with a GPS and a flashlight!

Hannah: (determined) Americans can exhibit real intelligence if they want to. Have you ever read the commentaries on a sports article? It's filled with nuance and complexity as well as a deep historical knowledge of the subject. It's goddamn analysis! But as soon as the topic turns to politics or religion, or art, or anything with an intellectual bent, Americans are ignorant... and proud of their ignorance. Like that anti-Semite Henry Ford.

Jack: (To Zoe) Well if he was an anti-Semite, (interrupting himself) wait a minute I thought you were an atheist? And I'm not saying he wasn't, it didn't matter to most folks. All they cared about was getting a car that they could afford. (To Hannah) I thought you wanted to talk about the welfare state!

Mark: (To Zoe) Independent.

Hannah: I do want to talk about the welfare state. It's Zoe's fault. (Hannah playfully sticks out her tongue at Zoe) She sidetracked us with all that anti-Semite stuff.

Zoe: Sorry guys. I didn't mean to (in a mocking tone) *get us off task*. Oh, (To Jack) and fuckwad, I can be an atheist and Jewish!

Jack: (Sardonically) And a lesbian! Don't forget that part!

Mark: (To Zoe) Independent.

Zoe: (To Jack) I'm not even going to respond to that. (Addressing the group) But what if I'm not off task?

Mark: (To Zoe) Independent.

Zoe: Isn't it conceivable that those in power exploit ethnic or religious conflict, or intra-class conflict, as a *diversion* (emphasis on the word diversion) from any discussions on class conflict and their underlying causes?

Jack: Don't forget sexual orientation! (Zoe is glaring at Jack and then turns to Mark)

Mark: (To Zoe) Independent.

Zoe: (furious at Mark) What are you going on about?!

Mark: It's the Dearborn Independent. You called it the Gazette.

Zoe: (sardonically) I stand corrected comrade.

Mark: (To Zoe) Nice... it doesn't take you long to reference Marx.

Zoe: (her anger subsides) I think he was right! Don't you think people would be more receptive to a discussion on class if they weren't so preoccupied with so called differences over race or religion? (Zoe glares at Jack waiting for him to say sexual orientation one more time stopping him just as he was about to say it) And also if they weren't so fucking stupid!

(Hannah looks at Zoe in a way that implies that Zoe really doesn't mean what she just said. Zoe looks at Hannah in a way that suggests that she does. Over the years Eugene and the other members of the quintet have mastered the ability to communicate non-verbally)

Eugene: (Calmly, but also chuckling) Do you think the Left could have gotten further during the mid-twentieth century...I mean, do you think they could have made some real progress toward a socialist state, if Americans had overcome their racial or religious differences...or religious allegiances?

Mark: I think, if they could, (pause for three beats) maybe FDR could have nationalized the banks? Maybe he could have convinced them...all those fireside chats! That it was in their best interests. You know...long term economic health and all of that. But still...FDR was no socialist.

Hannah: (coming around) I see what you guys are saying. But look! All those white men in power have always been adept at controlling the masses by manipulating the racial tensions within classes, or between ethnic groups or those with different religious beliefs.

Zoe: (speaking at the same time Hannah says the word beliefs) Like the motherfucking rich did to the non-slaveholding majority in the antebellum South. How else could they have convinced a poor white majority to support a small group of wealthy elites unless they used racial conflict and feelings of white supremacy as a goddamn smokescreen against recognition of class conflict!?

Jack: (relentless) Or sexual orientation.

Zoe: (subtle eye roll)

Hannah (continuing) ...FDR never could have convinced them to accept the nationalization of the banks because he never wanted the nationalization of the banks. Don't you remember how he treated Upton Sinclair when he ran for office in California? And! And! And! ... the people were too preoccupied with racial tensions as Blacks, and other minority groups, were starting to step up their efforts as they fought for their civil rights.

Jack: (Finally getting serious) Zoe, Hannah, I hear what you're saying, but I also think that people are afraid. Afraid of not having what they need... (Realizing something) oh and insecure about not getting what they think they need (emphasis on the word insecure), you know, the basics, because they have no faith that anyone other than themselves is going to go to bat for them...to help them, and *that's* (lingers on the word that's) why they get greedy and place their hopes on a system that promises them riches! It's greed and all the stuff that makes people greedy, in addition to what you've been saying about race and religion (turns to Zoe and Hannah) and sexual orientation ... that explains why people are willing to support a small ruling elite. They stupidly think that one day they could be rich too. They have no idea the game is rigged against them.

Zoe: Maybe... Jack you may have something there but I also think it's far more complicated than greed.

Mark: Horatio Alger is alive and well... Cool.... Hey, we better get going, church is letting out.

Eugene: Okay, I'll see you guys tomorrow.

(Eugene exits. The rest of the Quintet follow suit)

### Scene Three: *L'inquiétude*

(Monday afternoon. It's the last period of the day. Eugene is at the front of the classroom. Class has been in session for six minutes. Six minutes, thirty seconds remain)

Student 3: Mr. Debs?

Eugene: Yes, Ronald.

Student 3: I have a question about standard 34.6a regarding the spread of American civilization during the Spanish American War.

Eugene: Of course.

Student 3: What flaws were in the Philippine people?

Eugene: Flaws? What do you mean?

Student 3: The Philippine terrorists fought against the brave American soldiers for almost three years.

Eugene: Yes, that's right.

Student 3: What was wrong with them?

Eugene: (Raising an eyebrow that is only noticed by the other members of the quintet) Well, I suppose that some of them lacked a decent education.

Student 3: Because their school system lacked the proper moral certainties.

Eugene: No, I don't think we could truly say that.

Student 4: They lacked the rugged individualism that so many brave Americans possessed, especially the politicians who supported the war and the soldiers who fought so bravely.

Student 5: Were they suffering because they hadn't fully embraced free market capitalism?

Student 8: Did they not understand all the benefits that would come their way when they received the extension of democracy from America?

Student 9: Maybe they didn't understand manifest destiny?

Student 10: We helped them capture the terrorist, Emilio Ackwinalo, led by the brave American, General Funston.

Eugene: (trying to stay calm) Aguinaldo.

Student 10: (confused) what?

Eugene: His name is Emilio A-gui-nal-do.

Student 10: Yes, the terrorist.

Eugene: (Displaying some anger, but speaking softly) He wasn't a terrorist and there wasn't anything wrong with them...

Student 7: (Interrupting on the word them) But Mr. Debs why would the Filipino people fight against us...we were trying to help them?

Eugene: (remembering to frame his position within a question) Is it conceivable that some of what we were doing was not helpful?

Students 1-38 (unison monotone) That's impossible. Everything the United States of America does or has ever done is helpful to others.

Eugene: Everything?

(Zoe and Hannah look at Eugene and their message is clear. They want him to stop his line of reasoning immediately)

Eugene: (pauses and stares at the portraits of the Koch brothers, Ronald Reagan, Richard Nixon, Pat Robertson and the Olsen Twins. His mood becomes determined) ....After centuries of being colonized by the Spanish, the Filipino people were unwilling to let another strong military power dictate to them! And moreover, it's inaccurate to call their leader, Emilio Aguinaldo, a terrorist. He was willing to die to help his people break free of colonial rule...any (emphasis on the word any) colonial rule!

Student 3: (Confused yet without emotion)) Mr. Debs are you sure you're right? None of what you said is in our textbook or contained in any of the standards.

(Mark, Hannah, Jack and Zoe are scared. They have yet to hear Eugene explain what really happened to the rest of the class and fear what might happen to him)

Students 1, 2, 4-38: (In unison and without emotion) Mr. Debs, our book states that the childlike people of the Philippines welcomed American civilization because America possessed the finest technology, military, economic system, political system and religion. A few criminals fought against America's military but were quickly subdued by a superior and righteous force. Christian nations have always fought on the right side of history.

Zoe: No they haven't.

Eugene: (To Zoe) Don't...

Students 1-38 (In unison) I don't understand.

Zoe: Christian nations haven't always fought on the right side of history.

Eugene: (pleading) Please Zoe!

Zoe: During the Crusades, Christian warriors from Europe killed virtually everyone they encountered in their so called quest (emphasis on the word quest) to reclaim the Holy land from the Muslims... even other Christians.

Hannah: She's right. In the wake of the Protestant Reformation, thousands of hatchet wielding French Catholics, *Christians*, (emphasis on the word Christians) killed almost ten thousand Protestants simply because they viewed their take on Christianity as blasphemous.

Jack: You can't tell me that their murderous activities placed them on the right side of history.



Mark: Don't even get me started on the Inquisitions, or forcing Galileo to recant his scientific discoveries that proved that the sun, not the earth, is the center of the solar system....and putting him under house arrest!

Hannah: Or that Republican congressional nonsense of the early twenty-first century that ignored science because of pure greed, their worship of the wealthy, and their blind adherence to a corrupted and distorted interpretation of an ancient faith. Our hostile climate is a direct consequence of their willful ignorance!

Zoe: (Determined and sarcastic) Or Operation American Freedom, when the United States preemptively (emphasis on preemptively) used nuclear weapons- neutron bombs- because god told them to do it, killing all of the people of Iraq, Iran, Libya, Syria, Jordan, Nigeria, Venezuela, Kuwait, and Saudi Arabia, but leaving the oil refineries intact.

(The other students in the class are confused regarding the information they are hearing from the quintet. At that moment three cyborg assistant principals and two security drones burst into the classroom)

Mr. Charles 1: (Barking) Mr. Debs, you have lost control of the classroom environment!!

Mr. Charles 2: (Barking) You have broken the morality clause!!

Mr. Charles 3: (Barking) Your lack of professionalism will hurt your weekly formative evaluation! Your daily summative evaluation! Your hourly comprehensive evaluation, your quarterly TKES evaluation. Your mid-term summative eval.....

Eugene: (Interrupting Mr. Charles 3) Will you please just shut the fuck up!!!

Mr. Charles 1-3 (In unison) You are guilty of moral turpitude!

Drones 1 and 2: (robotic) Students 39, 40, 41, 42 (Zoe, Hannah, Mark and Jack) Put your hands behind your head and get on the ground! Now!

Zoe: I can't get on the ground, you fucking moron...patriotic... perspective... produced ...piece of shit! We're still leashed!

(Drone1 pushes a button on his belt that releases Zoe, Jack, Hannah and Mark from their leashes. All of them place their hands behind their heads and get to their knees. The security drones then taser them until they pass out.)

(Mr. Charles 1-3 taser Eugene as he is about to charge the security drones to protect his students. As he falls to the ground restraints are placed on his hands and ankles. The cyborgs then proceed to beat him with clubs despite the fact that he is already unconscious. The other students show no emotion as Eugene, Mark, Hannah, Jack and Zoe are tasered, and Eugene is beaten.)

Mr. Charles 1: (barking) Students, there are three minutes left in class. Take out your school supplied bibles and read Psalm 137:9, or 1 Timothy 2:12, or Jeremiah 19:9, or 1 Peter 2:18, or Kings 2:23-24, or Leviticus 18:22. (The remaining students instantly comply)

#### Scene Four: Life is But a Dream...Shboom

(Eugene awakens in a privately run for profit prison in the infirmary, in what was once the federal penitentiary in Ashland, Kentucky. There are forty seven other patients/prisoners in the room, many of whom are in pain or discomfit, since pain medication, or daily attention from the doctors and nurses, is not an option in this facility (designed to house no more than twenty patients). As a result of his injuries he drifts in and out of consciousness, and while this occurs he dreams of events both real and imagined...sometimes the two are mixed and it is hard to distinguish one from the other. The audience experiences these dreams in a series of flashbacks)

(First flashback, Eugene is in the first year of his teaching career. He is seated in an office in front of an administrator's desk. She is explaining the results of Eugene's observation.)

Administrator: (cheerful yet without empathy) As you can see I had to cite you for lack of proficiency at the beginning of your lesson because you failed to frame your learning objective within an essential question on your lesson plans.

Eugene: But with all due respect, wasn't it clear from my opening that the focus of that lesson was the transcendentalists and their connection to nineteenth century utopian movements?

Administrator: No. It was not clear.

Eugene: It was not clear?

Administrator: It was not clear.

Eugene: Did you see the quotation projected on the board by Emerson in reference to his views on slavery?

Administrator: I saw the quotation.

Eugene: And the primary source packet that I handed out, containing works by Thoreau, Emerson, Whitman, Melville, Poe, and Hawthorne?

Administrator: I saw the primary source packet. But I could not give you credit for using that in your lesson since you failed to get the Media Specialist's signature prior to making copies of those primary sources.

Eugene: (incredulous) So, even though I helped my students place in proper historical context several seemingly unrelated primary sources I get credit for none of that because I failed to get a signature on the copyright rules form.

Administrator: (smiling) That's exactly right. And remember I had no idea what your lesson was about because you failed to frame that lesson on your lesson plans within an essential question.

Eugene: (Almost at his wits end) Let me understand this.

Administrator: (cheerful) Of course.

Eugene: I failed to meet any of the teaching proficiencies.

Administrator: That's exactly right.

Eugene: Because I failed to frame my learning objective within an essential question and because I neglected to get the Media Specialist to sign off that I turned in a form stating that I understood copyright law as it pertains to materials used in the classroom.

Administrator: That's exactly right.

Eugene: But Dr. Froggybottom, you sat through a fifty seven minute class where my students analyzed eight or so primary source documents... analyzed them while referencing a ton of outside information...all appropriate... and eventually came to correctly conclude that the transcendentalists were a contrarian expression of nineteenth century utopianism.

Administrator: Yes, I saw that but I didn't understand what I saw.

Eugene: But why?

Administrator: (exceedingly cheerful) Because you failed to frame your learning objective within an essential question.

(Flashback two: Eugene is seated on a stool at the front of his classroom. The room is filled with parents who may sign their child up to take his class in US history. It is still, very early in his teaching career.)

Eugene: One of the central focuses of the class is historiography. It's the study of different historical perspectives on a similar topic.

Parent one: Mr. Dobs?

Eugene: (politely) Debs

Parent one: What?

Eugene: (politely) My last name is Debs.

Parent one: (insistent) My son said it was Dobs, look he sent me this text just now.

Eugene: The text does say Dobs, but my name is Debs.

Parent one: Are you sure? My son is really good at history.

Eugene: I'm sure he is, but my last name is Debs (attempting a joke) I got it from my father.

Parent one: (angry) I never had a father! Are you making fun of me?

Eugene: (attempting to diffuse the situation) No, of course not...

Parent two: (interrupting) I have a question!

Eugene: Yes, what would you like to know?

Parent two: I heard you got divorced.

Eugene: Well, yes, but why don't we focus on the syllabus and the reading list for this class.

Parent three: I heard you got divorced too!

Parent two: See! I'm not crazy! I knew this guy got divorced. Why'd you get divorced?

Parent three: Yeah, I wanna know that too!

Parent one: Is that why you changed your name to Dobs... from the shame of your divorce?

Parent four: I want to ask a question about politics?

Eugene: (relieved) Of course, what would you like to know?

Parent four: (serious) What are your personal political beliefs? You know what I mean? Are you one of those liberals...one of those gay marriage, abortion promoting, welfare

supporting, pre-marital sex loving, civil rights marching, white male hating, Birkenstock wearing, Prius driving, tree hugging, guns rights limiting, feminist, liberals?

Eugene: (sensing trouble) I don't think my personal beliefs are relevant ...and in any case they have no bearing on the class. My primary job is to give your children a solid foundation in US history and experience in different types of historical thinking.

Parent two: Is that why you got divorced? Cause of your (mocking tone) practice of pre-marital sex? Or is it because you like men? Oh... that's so disgusting! Just thinking about men having sex with other men makes me want to beat the ever living crap out of them...praise Jesus!

Parent one: Probably why he changed his name from Dobs. He's got something to hide.

Parent five: Hey, did you know he's the only social studies teacher not to coach a sport?

Parents 6-25 (In unison) Why don't you coach a sport? You got something against sports?

Eugene: No, I love sports, although I prefer those with less violent contact...so as to reduce the risk for concussions and other serious injury.

Parent one: Is that why you coach the chess club?

Parents 6-25 (In unison) The chess club!? Chess ain't a sport. You know who plays chess? Jews!

Parent two: And atheists!

Parent five: (sincerely confused) I thought Jews are atheists?

Parent three: Jews and atheists...I don't like the sound of that.

(The third flashback never happened. Eugene is walking toward a school that seems familiar, but very different from what he has experienced in his life as a teacher. On his way from the parking lot to the school building he passes scores of students engaged in a variety of activities: dozens are tending a garden, while others are harvesting vegetables or recording information on a tablet. As he continues walking he passes a large group of students who appear to be playing a game that combines dance, singing, and throwing a Frisbee. Further on he passes a group of students sitting under a tree. They're talking and eating while making reference to passages of a book they hold in their hands. As he walks he appears to be gliding over the grounds of the school: Eugene passes well-manicured gardens, growing herbs, fruits, and vegetables; he glides past a dairy farm, and a barn raising, except the builders are not Amish, but a combination of students, teachers, and community volunteers. He continues his glide and enters the main entrance to the school. To his left, a small group of students and teachers are playing an assortment of

instruments, acoustic and electronic. The music is familiar and strange at the same time. To his right is one of the school's offices (decentralization is the norm). Eugene enters, waves and says hi to three secretaries: (all of whom hold doctorates and when they see him, greet him with enthusiasm) Wil, Jason, and Debbie. They are busy performing some of the logistics of the school's operation and are discussing an upcoming interview)

Eugene: Hi guys! What's up?

Debbie: (handing forms to several teachers and responding to Eugene) Hi Gene! We're getting ready to interview a couple of candidates to teach the A.P. Calculus II class.

Eugene: (innocently) Isn't that kind of thing handled by the administration.

Wil: (bemused, but laughing his comment off as no big deal and handing a teacher a package that had recently arrived) Gene... we haven't had administrators for some time...that job is shared between the teachers and us.

Jason: (thinking back and confirming on a laptop an academic meet between this school and a rival in a couple of weeks, and handing a student a small plant grown in the hydroponic lab) I think it's been a good twenty years or so since administrators worked in schools.

Debbie: (thinking back and handing the cook in charge of this week's menu a new lemon zester he had ordered for a new recipe, while also helping a young child with a difficult knot she is practicing for her Eagle Scout Badge, and lastly nodding in approval to a student and her novel solution to a physics problem) I can't remember when it happened...but at some point a small group of very smart folk were able to argue that administrators at the school –in fact bureaucracy in general at the county, state, and federal level- were too concerned with public relations, fundraising or educational issues that had become politicized. Their numbers have been drastically reduced since most of their activities had become counterproductive to sound pedagogy. Today, all administrators must demonstrate to students, teachers, and parents their educational value. Only then can they retain their jobs.

Eugene: (matter of fact) Makes sense to me.

Wil: (passing a brochure to the German teacher, a calendar of events to parent volunteers, and consoling one of the younger students whose pet fish died the night before) Exactly. One of the grandchildren of the Italian director Federico Fellini wrote a seminal book on curriculum theory based in part on the film his granddad made called *Orchestra Rehearsal*.

Debbie: (Performing CPR on the overweight pastor of the local church while editing a peer reviewed essay for a highly respected curriculum journal) Great film! The orchestra did away with the conductor since they figured he was unnecessary to the creation of music.

Wil: (Creating art out of found objects and learning Swahili from a computer program)  
And usually a pain in the ass as well!

(Everyone laughs)

Jason: (Removing a planter's wart from the librarian's foot while demonstrating to the biology class the proper way to hold a scalpel) Yeah, I love that film! Anyway, his grandson wrote this really convincing book on curriculum theory that took the message of his grandfather's film to its logical conclusion: it put forth the proposition that skilled teachers and students, like skilled musicians who know how and what to play, know what needs to be done to truly create an environment where each can learn. So, in the same way in which an orchestra can perform well without a conductor, schools can work just fine without administration as it was once practiced.

Debbie: (Putting the finishing touches on an equation that proves cold fusion while helping a very young student with his head covering.) Yeah, he wrote that with enough experience at ensemble work, the chaos that once plagued collaboration from the bottom up could be minimized, if not eliminated.

Wil: (Performing reverse circumcisions on a group of very grateful boys...painlessly while demonstrating to a group of fashion minded students the correct way to wear a salwar kameez and a sherwani) Gene, you might recall the curriculum program on creative collaboration from the bottom up that was first piloted in Finland, back in 2026.

Eugene: Ya know I think I do remember that. Didn't they pick Finland because of the way in which their culture privileges intellectual rigor? And the way they treat their teachers.

Jason: (Taking a perfect loaf of bread out of an oven, putting a few more strokes of acrylic paint on his abstract of the sun, and answering a parent's question over the phone) It definitely wasn't for their pickled fish! (Gene and Jason laugh)

Wil: (Handing a student a slide rule, and adding to his drawing of a less expensive version of a particle accelerator) Yeah that's right Gene. And as you might remember, they chose well. After Finland the movement spread to the other Scandinavian countries, Europe, Asia, Canada, Latin America, Africa, Australia and finally the United States.

Debbie: (Tasting what appears to be the perfect dry rub, and solving James Madison's problem of sovereignty, in ways that Madison himself overlooked) The U.S. held out because of the lobbying efforts of wealthy corporations and the rest of the one percent who feared, and rightly so, that a program that demonstrates the error of top down administration would destroy the ethos that essentially justifies the existence of the one percent.

Jason: (Adjusting the lamp shade so their work area has the perfect amount of light and reconciling quantum physics with Einstein's Theory of Relativity) Eventually, even the people of the United States understood the folly of administration from the top down, especially in education.

Debbie: (Solving, with non-toxic chemicals, pest control for the school's gardens, and perfecting her internal combustion engine that runs on hydrogen) Exactly!

Wil: (Completing Schubert's Unfinished Symphony and handing a tissue to a young boy in the first grade) Anyway Gene, as long as you're here you might as well grab those boxes...the books you ordered last week came in.

Eugene: (excited) Cool! It's that anthology of what was considered Black radical poetry from the 1960's. Pretty tame stuff for today, but it scared the shit out of white people during that time period.

Jason: (Convincing a small group of elderly visitors to the school why the Confederate flag is a symbol of hate and making the perfect samosa) Nice Gene, that sounds fascinating. If you have any extra copies, I would love to read that poetry! Hey, make sure you stop by the culinary arts room....they made a chicken mole for lunch today!

Eugene: Thanks guys! I will. Oh, and I'll check if there are any extra copies of the poetry anthology. (he exits)

#### Scene Five: Authenticity

(Eugene emerges from his dreams in considerable pain. One of the patient/inmates, in the next bed, notices his pain and offers him a couple of pills. He swallows them and within a few minutes is feeling a lot better)

Eugene: Thanks.

J.P. Altgeld: You're welcome. (Looks him straight in the eye and puts out his hand) John.

Eugene: (Gingerly) Gene. Why are you in here, you seem okay?

J.P. Altgeld: I've got locomotor ataxia...it means I have trouble keeping my balance. And I'm prone to fevers. I usually work in the infirmary... today and probably for the next few days I'm a patient.

Eugene: That's why you had pain pills. But aren't the authorities strict with their supply?

J.P. Altgeld: Oh they're strict, but fortunately they can't count.

Eugene: You can always count on their ineptitude.



J.P. Altgeld: Indeed.

Eugene: (hesitant) Can I ask what got you locked up?

J.P. Altgeld: Sure. Let's see... (as if reading a grocery list) protesting the use of child labor, revealing the chemicals used in fracking, disclosing the profits made by privately run prisons in the fish farm industry, releasing the internal emails of the coal mining industry that proved the work environment unsafe... Stuff like that..(Pause) I don't want to be in prison for my beliefs and my actions, but I have to.

Eugene: What... they didn't charge you with kidnapping the Lindbergh baby?!

J. P. Altgeld: (Laughs) You?

Eugene: I was teaching non-standardized U.S. history.

J.P. Altgeld: (as if making a small discovery) So... you're the teacher.

Eugene: Yes. You know about me?

J.P. Altgeld: (quickly concerned) Hold on a minute (pauses for about 30 seconds while subtly gazing in the direction of a small dome attached to the ceiling), Okay, we can talk again.

Eugene: (confused) What was that?

J.P. Altgeld: See the camera dome?

Eugene: I see it. I have (corrects himself) *had* one in what used to be my classroom.

J.P. Altgeld: Its color slightly changes when it turns on and off... When it's safe and not safe to speak.

Eugene: (Eugene thinks back to the dome in his former classroom) Of course. How did you know I'm a teacher?

J.P. Altgeld: I've made some allies with a couple of the guards and one of the nurses.

Eugene: I was taken in with four of my students. Do you know anything about them?

J. P. Altgeld: The two boys are here... in general population. The girls were taken to the women's prison, about ten miles from here. I don't know anything about the condition of the girls, but the boys are okay.

Eugene: I tried to stop them.

J.P. Altgeld: What do you mean?

Eugene: I tried to stop them from speaking the truth about U.S. history. We got so good at hiding what we felt...and knew (emphasis on knew). ...I guess we just snapped.

J.P. Altgeld: It happens...don't be so hard on yourselves. How could anyone with a soul and a brain not lose control?

Eugene: I feel terrible...I feel responsible...

J.P. Altgeld: (Interrupting on the word responsible, but with compassion) Stop. You were one of the few healthy people in an otherwise broken system. Most folks had been so manipulated by hate and fear and deprivation, that they contributed to and were part of a grand delusional narrative... (pauses again, this time Gene needs no explanation as to why) somehow you and your students were able to rise above that and see things for what they really are.

Eugene: (depressed) But look where its gotten us. We're locked up, and seen as criminals!

(At that moment a nurse walks in wheeling a tray of medical supplies. Gene freezes, but John looks at him and signals that she's okay)

Nurse Jones: (calm with assurance) Good afternoon. How are my boys?

Alex: (determined) Feeling strong Mother!

Nurse Jones: Really, the black and blues on your face tell me a different story!?

J. P. Altgeld: (to Gene) That's Alex, our resident revolutionary.

(Gene and Alex look at each other. Alex is in a bed, on the other side of Gene. Alex puts out his hand. Gene takes it)

Alex: Alexander Berkman.

Eugene: Eugene Debs...Gene.

Alex: Good to meet you. You look worried.

Eugene: Well... yeah...my students and I have been Tasered, I've been beaten...and now we're locked up.

Alex: Prison isn't the worst place for a person who thinks.

Nurse Jones: (To Gene) Let me take a look at that eye. (She gently examines Gene's right eye) Yeah, boy...the drones and administrators did a number on you. How's your vision?

Eugene: It's okay.

Nurse Jones: How many fingers am I holding up? (She holds up three)

Eugene: (Joking) twenty one.

Nurse Jones: Good!

(Nurse Jones turns to Alex)

Nurse Jones: How's my boychik? For real.

Alex: (smiles) Always ready to (they all pause for about thirty seconds).....give it to the man!

Nurse Jones: (sighs) Looks to me like this time they gave it to you!

Alex: Perhaps. I'll get them back.

(Nurse Jones smiles and wheels her cart to attend to the other inmates/patients. Alex turns to Gene)

Alex: (To Gene and pointing to his face) The guards, at least most of them, are on the Koch Industry payroll. Occasionally, they use my face as a prison piñata.

Eugene: Why?

Alex: A few years back I tried to kill the number two man for Koch Industries.

Eugene: Why?

Alex: Old school civil disobedience never worked for me. It might've worked for Gandhi and King, it wasn't working for me.

Eugene: What'd you do?

Alex: I barged into the office of Henry Frick, with my knife and gun, with the sole intention to kill him.

Eugene: I take it things didn't work out as planned?

Alex: No it didn't. Turns out he's one tough son of a bitch. And he had guards helping him.

Eugene: And what if you were successful? What would you have achieved?

J.P. Altgeld: That's the question isn't it?

Alex: Always the political scientist.

J. P. Altgeld: Always the violent revolutionary.

Alex: You think politics is the solution?!

J.P. Altgeld: Long term...yes (they pause) you think the death of the guy you tried to kill would have changed anything? Huh?! Somebody else would've moved into that guy's job before the corpse grew cold. It's not enough to kill the top dog. You have to kill the ethos that supports the idea of a top dog.

Nurse Jones: (Making her way back towards Gene, John, and Alex) What's wrong with a little bit of both? Huh?

Alex: Politics and violence. Ahhh...I don't know...maybe?

Eugene: A little rebellion now and then...

Nurse Jones: That's Jefferson isn't it?

Eugene: Yes, in a letter to Madison after Shay's Rebellion.

J. P. Altgeld: I remember that. So Jefferson was an advocate of violence? I thought he was a pacifist?

Eugene: I don't think he ever meant to support the violence. In that letter to Madison he condemns the uprising.

Nurse Jones: Then why say a little rebellion now and then?

Eugene: Probably, to temper the response to Shay and the like. Too forceful would have, for Jefferson, felt like the heavy handed response of an oppressive monarchy.

Alex: But wasn't the government unable to muster a forceful response, in the first place? Weren't they still under the Article of Confederation?

Eugene: You remember your U.S. history.

Nurse Jones: Then you'll also remember (everyone pauses) ... that an army was raised with private funds to put down the rebellions.... To protect the moneyed interests. Sounds familiar doesn't it?

J. P. Altgeld: That it does Mother...that it does.

Alex: It would seem that your country's claim of a government by the people is a little weak.

Nurse Jones: Oh it's by the people...but only some of the people.

Eugene: True.... (Gene pauses to reflect) this feels good.

Alex: What feels good?

Eugene: Our discussion...it's honest and everyone's listening and contributing...it's refreshing.

J.P. Altgeld: Gene...you did that.

Eugene: Did what?

J.P. Altgeld: Asked good questions. Listened...moved the discussion along.

Nurse Jones: Isn't that what you do? You are a teacher aren't you?

Eugene: Not for a very long time.

Nurse Jones: You can change that.

Eugene: How?

Nurse Jones: Look around you. You're in a building with people who have the time to listen and a willingness to learn....what really happened...not the bullshit they teach in the schools.

J.P. Altgeld: The stuff we need to learn.

Alex: The stuff we have to learn!

Eugene: (Not completely convinced) Okay.....

J.P. Altgeld: You can do what you do here...in the prison classrooms.

Eugene: How's that?

J.P. Altgeld: (matter of fact) The authorities only care about the profits they make by exploiting prison labor. They let some of the inmates take or teach classes. You could teach history. I can help.

Eugene: With what materials? I don't have any of my books.

Alex: Smart doesn't come from books! It comes from making the right decisions right now!

Eugene: Yeah...maybe...but an informed person can make better decisions. Books help. I cannot live without books (Eugene realizes he just quoted Jefferson without effort. He wonders for a moment where that thought came from and returns his focus to the discussion).

J.P. Altgeld: (turns to Gene as if offering him a solution to his problem) When the schools became standardized, they shipped their books off to the various landfills...but get this...they were full, so they dumped them at the prisons figuring most prisoners were illiterate so what's the harm in leaving potentially revolutionary materials in their hands. (Pause)

Alex: Except we're not illiterate...some of the guys on death row are better legal scholars than those *momzas* on the Supreme Fucking Court!

J.P. Altgeld: (to Gene) If I can help you get a class or two to teach, would you do it?

Eugene: (mood brightens) Absolutely.

### Scene Six: *Anschauung*

(A few months have passed since Eugene's time in the prison infirmary. True to his word, J.P. Altgeld was able to get Eugene out of working in the prison fish farm, mostly because there were plenty of people for that, since it paid ten cents more per day than any of the other prison jobs, and no one likes to teach. Eugene is inside a small prison room reallocated as a classroom. The class has been in session for two weeks. It takes place daily, Monday through Friday and lasts for approximately two to three hours. Eugene has been given permission to extend class for as much as one extra hour, for a total of four possible hours of class per day, if extra time is needed. The classroom is small, but not cramped. Light is provided by several lamps placed throughout the room and from the window that allows the afternoon sun to shine through, although the bars outside the window are a not so subtle reminder of their imprisonment. There is an old fashioned chalkboard on one wall and about fifteen or so student desks that integrate chair and writing surface, plus some assorted chairs scattered about. To his delight the room is filled with boxes of books and vinyl records of all sorts, discarded because of their perceived lack of value. There is also a record player, tube amplification and speakers. Eugene was told he could teach whatever he likes regarding history, although, given his knowledge of U.S. history, odds are that the class will largely focus on U.S. history,

unless one or more of the students bring up a legitimate request for a shift in focus. If that's the case, all bets are off. He is not required to turn in lesson plans, write essential questions on the board, turn in a syllabus, post the standards on the wall, have his students take any tests that are not of his or his students' design, keep a log of parental contact, participate in "professional learning opportunities," go to faculty meetings, attend parent conferences, enforce dress codes, coach a sport, attend open house, pre-planning, post-planning, collaborative planning-unless the collaboration is between him and the students in the class- participate in honors night, graduation ceremonies, or any of the other tasks or rituals typically required of teachers. Any inmate that qualifies can attend as long as space remains which for this first class is twenty students, and they meet the qualifications. There are a few requirements: the student/inmate must agree to stay in the class for its length-one semester; the student/inmate must be willing to listen and respond honestly to the information being presented in the class and complete all agreed upon outside assignments; and the student/inmate must not have engaged in violence, unless it was in self-defense. The prison authorities have not installed a camera in the ceiling. Instead, they keep two guards outside of the classroom who spend most of their time watching on their tablets the contemporary equivalent of Roman chariot races and gladiator games, instead of paying attention to the goings on of a history class. In fact, much of what has transpired over the last two weeks has given them little cause to be concerned.)

(The following inmates are part of Eugene's first class)

Galileo  
 Martin Luther King Jr.  
 Lenny Bruce  
 Dalton Trumbo  
 H.J. Rosenthal

(Returning characters)

J. P. Altgeld  
 Alexander Berkman  
 Mark  
 Jack

(It is Monday, week three of Eugene's history class. During the first two weeks of class several topics emerged out of the class discussions and assigned readings. On the previous Friday, the class agreed to more fully investigate one of them: Is violence justifiable to achieve a political goal? Class has already been in session a couple of hours. Eugene plays a record. Lenny, Martin, Mark, Jack and Alex are nodding their heads to the music. The other students seem unaffected)

Lenny: Hey Gene, that's some pretty hip shit we're listening to. These cats swing like a motherfucker. Who is that?

Eugene: A British group called the Clash. This album is called Sandinista.

Mark: (remembering) Great record!

Galileo: (probing) Gene, why are we listening to this music? What is its connection to our study of whether or not violence is justifiable to pursue a political goal?

Eugene: (smiling) Great question. Would anyone care to answer it?

H.J. Rosenthal: The group, The Clash, recorded this triple album in 1980 to highlight the cause of the Sandinistas and to point out the continued hypocrisy of the United States' foreign policy, especially during the Cold War years.

Galileo: That is an unsatisfactory response to my question.

H.J. Rosenthal: Hold on. I'm not done.

Galileo: My apologies. Please continue.

H.J. Rosenthal: For years the United States had been backing criminal, corrupt, regimes simply because of their anti-Soviet stance.

Mark: That's right. There was the CIA led coup that helped the Shah of Iran come to power in 1954.

Jack: And Pinochet in Chile in 1973.

Mark: And Diem in South Vietnam in the early 1960's.

H.J. Rosenthal: By 1980, Nicaragua was just one more example of the United States' government either supporting a dictator like Somoza who routinely tortured and perpetrated unspeakable crimes against his people, or trying to unseat someone like Ortega, who was democratically elected, because of his alliance with the Soviets.

Galileo: You still haven't adequately addressed our query.

H.J. Rosenthal: (angry) Hold on a minute. I'm not done.

Galileo: Again, my apologies.

H.J. Rosenthal: Anyway...my argument is this: If the Reagan administration can exchange arms for hostages and use the proceeds to fund the Contras of Nicaragua, then I can sell a shitload of cocaine and use the money to fund the *Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional*.

Alex: I agree. A democratic regime should be allowed to defend itself from tyranny.



Dalton Trumbo: From within or without.

Galileo: (Sarcastic) The quiet man speaks!

(Dalton Trumbo slowly flips off Galileo who replies back to him first with his right hand, then quickly switches to his left when he realizes the missing finger of his right hand)

Martin Luther King Jr.: But doesn't violence beget further violence?

Jack: From what I've read historically...yes. But what's a legitimate response...turning the other cheek? I don't think so.

Mark: Consider how many fewer people might have died if the United States responded to Hitler in 1937 instead of 1941.

Lenny (to MLK): You gonna tell me with a straight face you never wanted to hit Bull Connor?

Martin Luther King Jr.: I didn't want to hit him. It would not have been a Christian response.

Lenny: (sarcastically): But *schtupping* other women while you were married...that's a Christian response!?

Eugene: Let's stay focused on the question.

Lenny: (to MLK) Sorry man. (to H.J.) Hey brother...you still got any blow?

H.J. Rosenthal: Funny.

Eugene: Gentlemen...please.

J.P. Altgeld: What if we look at this from another angle? (everyone listens) What if all Nation States made a concerted effort to reduce and eventually remove the underlying causes of war?

Mark: I see what you're getting at. If England and France didn't demand such absurdly huge reparations from Germany following WW I, then perhaps the conditions don't exist for the election of Hitler in 1933.

Jack: Let's go back even further...before WW I...before Germany's militarization, which, it could be argued, was a legitimate response to Great Britain's control of international trade.

Galileo: What if! What if! People are too fickle and unpredictable! I'd rather deal with particles and light waves.

Mark: (To Galileo) And too easily manipulated! When I think back to the students in our class, just sitting there while Jack, Zoe, Hannah, Gene, and I were getting Tasered and beaten...all I'm saying is if anyone, living or droid, comes at me or my friends in a violent way...I'm kicking some ass...sorry Martin.

Martin Luther King Jr.: That's okay son.

Lenny: I'm kicking ass too!

Alex: With what... your obscene words (emphasis on obscene words)!? We're talking about real violence...physical (emphasis on the word physical) violence. You think you can do that?

Lenny: (unconvincingly) Yes.

Alex: Bullshit! You'll do what you always do...retreat into sex and narcotics.

Lenny: Hey, don't knock sex and narcotics...it's a great way to spend an afternoon...or a few days...months... (trails off).

Dalton: Let's not be so hard on the guy...

Lenny: Thanks Spartacus!

Eugene: Let's not lose focus on the original question. We're talking about violence as an appropriate response to achieve a political goal...not a street brawl.

Mark: What about the US response to Japan during WW II? Was that violence justified?

Eugene: Good question Mark!

J.P. Altgeld: Perhaps our question should be reframed?

Eugene: How so?

J.P. Altgeld: Perhaps we should concede that for humans pacifism is a pipe dream? It's inherent to our species to be violent...on any scale.

Galileo: That's logical

J.P. Altgeld: Perhaps the better question should be whether or not violence that is a proportional response (emphasis on the word proportional) to an attack is ethically justified.

Alex: Hey...*boychik*, the Japanese bombed you first! As far as I'm concerned they don't deserve a proportional response.

Jack: The Japanese military (emphasis on the word military) bombed us.

Mark: And yet we destroyed and killed anywhere from forty to eighty percent of the civilian population as we firebombed Japan...and this was before we dropped atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki!

Jack: Proportionality should be the goal if a nation wants to behave ethically.

Martin: I suppose a reduction in violence is preferable to unmitigated violence. But my faith in God and my commitment to my church compels me to seek a non-violent solution.

Galileo: (mumbling) Commitment to your church?! It must be very different from my church.

Martin: You're welcome to pray with me.

Galileo: No thanks Martin.

Eugene: Good work everyone. See you tomorrow.

Lenny: Wait. Do we have time to hear the other side of that record?

Eugene: Sure Lenny. Why don't you flip it over.

(As the music of the Clash plays the lights fade on Eugene and his students, downstage left. Downstage right, the lights come up on Hannah and Zoe surrounded by several women in a classroom setting.)

Hannah: Whose turn is it to lead the discussion?

Zoe (confidently) Mine.

Emma Goldman: I have a question...

(End scene. The lights fade as the music of the Clash gets louder)

“...The past should be altered by the present as much as the present is directed by the past.” From “*Tradition and the Individual Talent*,” by T.S. Elliot (2007)

“You can’t improvise on nothing man; you’ve gotta improvise on something.” Charles Mingus

## CHAPTER 6

### Improvisation, Institutions and Standards

While it might be convenient to think of an improvisational activity as either resisting or re-enforcing the “standards” of an institution like public education or popular music, it would be more accurate to state that an improvisational activity is intimately tied to that institution, and can neither completely resist or adequately re-enforce the standards which make up that institution. Moreover, it is inaccurate to describe an improvisational activity as existing “outside” of an institution or institutions. Still, I will at times add to the confusion by referring to “that spontaneous act” and the well-learned “standard” as if both are autonomous and separate from one another. All improvisations- musical, theatrical, and conversational, for example- are composed of the raw material that flows to and from (and lies in between and perhaps at times in a metaphysical space) the dominant and subordinate culture(s)- the former feeding off the latter in a mostly parasitic relationship. If this improvisational activity is to be transformative of a standard or standards (the goal of all who call and /or practice a radical pedagogy) the participants must be attentive to the dialogical nature of this activity, but more importantly willing and able to make a decision that, at least for a time, resembles a just and perhaps difficult choice. And within the field of improvisation all of this must happen “spontaneously” or be the result of a “spontaneous” act. For these things to happen, the people involved

must hone a developing relational intelligence since what they are engaged in is a battle of sorts. In my use of relational intelligence, I am not referring to this term in a narrow sense; for example, in the way a corporate CEO might wish his employees behaved so that they maximize profits by working more efficiently. Instead, to borrow a term from Curriculum scholar Marla Morris, I would like to “tease out” additional ways of looking at relational intelligence, for it is in this way that I can analyze the interaction between improvisation and institutions as well as the nature of improvisational activity, since the latter has significant impact on the former. I find the expression to “tease out” so appropriate for this discussion since it mirrors a significant part of the activity, which occurs between the best improvisers in any field. Indeed, a musician plays a series of notes in such a way as to solicit (tease out) a unique response from her fellow players (seemingly perfect for that moment) that would not have been played had those initial notes never been heard; or a skilled teacher, so attuned to her students and their moment, who is able to coax out of her students a response that is both honest and furthers their inquiry. To help me in this task are an assortment of Curriculum writers/practitioners, jazz musicians/ writers, those who write about and/or perform improvisational comedy, and some from “traditional” theatre. I am also inspired, and perhaps “inspired” (thank you Ted Aoki (2005)!), to fashion an argument from a wide assortment of sources because of my background in improvisational theatre, my time in the classroom, and my study of Curriculum. For now, I will examine the relational intelligence found in the classroom, jazz and improvisational theatre and analyze the extent to which improvisation influences various institutional standards. At times, I will go beyond the confines of improvisation in jazz, education, and theatre and touch upon topics that are

important to music, education, and theatre in general. In other words, I will draw upon the work of some writers and practitioners of music, education, and theatre because much of what is important to their field are also relevant to my discussion of improvisation and institutions.

### Relational Intelligence

As I have mentioned, the notion of relational intelligence needs to be “teased out” so that we can look beyond the limited interactions of students and teachers who are shackled within an environment and ontology that is largely performative, in the sense that Lyotard (1984) argued. It is, therefore, useful to consider Buber’s (1958) statement that, “All real living is meeting,” from his book, *I and Thou* (p. 11). Buber’s notion of meeting can be (and should be) interpreted in many ways: one such way is in the meeting of two people, perhaps for the first time. Each brings with her a unique set of experiences and expectations. And while the meeting is “improvised” it is also scripted. This script is the product of societal norms and the only way that this pre-written script gets changed is if both of these folks are willing to drop or alter these norms (read standards) as they become aware, respond to, and embrace the differences of the Other, assuming of course that there are differences. More often than not a very limited meeting takes place that simply reinforces the standards they both share. Sometimes a more expanded meeting occurs, the kind that Buber had in mind with his notion of meeting. This was the case with Christopher Uhl (2010), a professor of environmental science at Penn State who writes about “acknowledging what is real” (p. 105), in the classroom so genuine inquiry can take place. Like the best jazz players, teachers, and theatrical improvisers Uhl is in pursuit of genuine inquiry, which therefore means he is in pursuit and makes use of

surprise -the type of surprise that comes from the cognitive *and* embodied responses of his students in the classroom. For many it is useful to discuss these terms as if they are separate and have no impact upon the other. I would suggest that the cognitive and embodied are intertwined- each refreshing the other. I would also suggest that the cognitive response is rarely ever free from embodied experience in the first place. While there are essays to be read and concepts to be absorbed, professor Uhl's goals are open-ended. He understands the pedagogical negligence involved in the narrow minded task of "covering the material" as he asks rhetorically, "...What if we gave ourselves permission to stay right in the present moment and trust that when our turn comes what we say will be compelling because we will speak our present-moment-truth (and not some rehearsed script)" (p. 107)? Uhl acknowledges the risks involved in allowing the embodied experiences from himself and his students to influence the process of inquiry, yet for him the risks are outweighed by the rewards of a more thorough inquiry, or in other words a more complete and honest meeting as suggested by Buber. For Uhl, the "present-moment truth" also meant honestly confronting his students when they were unprepared for class. He shared his displeasure with the students in his freshman seminar who were unprepared and required from them a meaningful explanation or a heads up if the weekly assigned reading was not to be completed. In this context Uhl writes that, "For the first time in the semester, I began to see who has been in the room" (p. 107). Indeed, what is important for Uhl is that he and the students in the room honestly confront the collection of essays on environmental science with their hopes, fears, prejudices, lack of attentiveness-all of it. With his insistence on seeing the students in this fashion Uhl is demonstrating the inadequacy of a pedagogy, which views the students as irrelevant to the inquiry process.

For him, the material and the study of environmental science are enriched when an honest intellectual inquiry occurs by the student's careful reading of the "material", their responses (cognitive and embodied), and the discussions that follow. In fact to see the students as irrelevant to the learning process is to miss the point entirely.

In his study entitled, *Influencing Pedagogy Through the Creative Practices of Youth*, Leif Gustavson (Hill, Vasudevan, 2008,) goes much further than Professor Uhl when he argues that an effective pedagogy should come from the creative work students do outside of the school. He focuses on one of his students, Gil, who is a turntablist. Gil reminds me of what Rancière (2009) refers to as the, "voice of a people to come" (p. 57). Indeed, Rancière writes that, "...The artistic voice of the people is the voice of a people to come. The people to come is the impossible people which, at one and the same time, would be the divided people of protest and the collective harmony of a people in tune with the very breath of nature, be it a chaotic or a 'chaosmatic' nature" (p. 57). It's worth noting that Gustavson has an extraordinary relationship with Gil! Employing composition, improvisation and many hours of study and play, Gil's play reminds me of the improvisational jazz performer as he samples various sounds from a wide assortment of records. Despite their different mediums, both Gil (through sampling) and the jazz musician (by quoting, and I am thinking specifically about the album by Sonny Rollins, *Way Out West*, (1957) in which Rollins subverts the notion of the white heroic cowboy. He does this in two ways: first, the album cover ironically shows Rollins in 1950's cowboy garb, at a time when Westerns dominated the television and "silver screen." Second, in his masterful transformation of the insipid cowboy tune, *I'm an Old Cowhand*) reach back into a multitude of sounds with specific meanings and through



their common aesthetic transform those meanings as they play and perform. Indeed, Gustavson (2008) writes,

Later, I asked the two seniors and Gil, “Why are the samples that you pick so interesting when you take them out of context?” This came up while Gil spun the soundtrack to *Raiders of the Lost Ark*. While experimenting with various voices and sounds on the album, Gil found the sound of the gunshot. Through scratching the sound, he transformed the gunshot into something different—a drum beat.

Through the improvisational freedom of reappropriating this sound, Gil took a dominant discourse (gunshot as violent act) and invested it with his own particular inflection (gunshot as rhythm) (p. 89).

The discovery by professor Uhl of the importance of being attentive to one’s students in the classroom as they are thinking and reacting to the class as it happens, and Gustavson’s pedagogical insights gleaned by closely working with his students and their work are a central feature of William Ayers’ eloquent book, *Teaching Toward Freedom* (2004). In it he writes:

The teacher takes a step out from behind the desk, away from the lectern, off the pedestal, and perhaps off the cliff. There is a feeling of vertigo as the teacher looks with new eyes, as the familiar is made strange. There is risk and there is fear—hard work, this never ending attentiveness, this improvisation— but there is satisfaction as well. She frees herself from the terror of teaching. She no longer has to pretend to be a god, all knowing, all powerful, beneficent one minute, punishing the next. She can shed the hypocrisy and phoniness of the teacher pose and begin to face herself as she really is. She can discover her students as they

really are, too, and recognize that there is always more to know in all directions.

Who in the world are they (p. 43)?

It is the attentiveness of the teacher to her students, and the attentiveness of the students to each other, their material, their teacher, and themselves, that contribute to a successful improvisation, and thus, a successful class. The other contributing factors to a successful improvisation are the genuine pursuit of surprise and the willingness to accept an ontology (even if that ontology remains unnamed and uninterrogated) that goes beyond the cognitive and the linear. When all of these elements are in full swing (and I am referring to the kind of swing that is in most good jazz) improvisation does have the ability to transform standards that need to be discarded, fleshed out, or simply polished. Because within the tension of that dialectical improvisational moment is an opportunity for what Habermas and Adorno have referred to as pragmatic action. Perhaps the best description of this action comes from William Pinar (1994) who writes, "...Pragmatic action cannot be frozen into principles and concepts composed before such action, and assumed to be legitimated locally and empirically. Pragmatic action is born only in the arena of action, and to the extent one enters this arena with static principles of how to behave, one deforms the situation..." (p. 118). Once Professor Uhl realized the importance of seeing his students for who they really are at that moment, and move beyond the need to cover the material, (and while we're on the subject, besides the hypocrisy inherent in the proclamation that one can "cover the material", wouldn't it make more sense to lose that expression and un-cover it, expose it, stir it up!?) he was better able to engage in the pragmatic action described by Pinar and embrace what Aoki (2005) has described as a "curriculum -as-lived-experience" (p. 160). Uhl was willing to

let go of specific goals that in an earlier time would have been non-negotiable, because he was willing and able to honestly “meet” his students, moving beyond what Aoki (2005) has described as “curriculum -as-plan,” and trust that their present moment of truth, composed of a changing continuum of standards and spontaneous creation, would be enough to guide his class toward a meaningful inquiry.

*Vox Populi, Vox Dei?*  
(The Voice of the People is the Voice of God?)

Improvisation that approaches the pragmatic action referred to by Pinar, and demonstrated by Uhl and Gustavson, would seem to be at its best when it can occur within an environment that has already decided that it would accept a certain degree of playfulness. Still, there isn't a recipe that would let someone construct such an environment. There isn't a schematic diagram that could show this ideal environment so that it may be replicated ad infinitum despite the proclamations of many in and out of education that claim to have the winning formula. But for the improv player, and improvisation in general, the environment is crucial for a good performance or rehearsal. In speaking of environment and rehearsal (and by the way it's all a rehearsal), British theatrical director Peter Brook (1996) has said that:

The quality of the work done in any rehearsal comes entirely from the creativity of the working climate-and creativity cannot be brought into being by explanations. The language of rehearsals is like life itself: it uses words, but also silences, stimuli, parody, laughter, unhappiness, despair, frankness and concealment, activity and slowness, clarity and chaos. Brecht recognized this and in his last years he surprised his associates by saying that the theatre must be

naïve. With this word he was not reneging his life's work: he was pointing out that the action of putting together a play is always a form of playing, that watching a play is playing (p. 77).

Indeed, good improvisation, akin to the creativity mentioned by Brook (and the play desired by Brecht), and as of yet undefined, can and should emerge from an environment that allows things to happen. A place that is open to and informed by chance and occasionally filled with the pregnant moment. But this moment must be noticed. This is a very special place; one cannot simply will this type of place into being. Instead, the environment that Brook or anyone for that matter concerned with creative justice is referring to comes into being on its own. The best that a creative type can do is simply notice when the time is right to take a stand, or make a choice, based on their attentiveness to that environment. In other words this environment can't be forced –it must be noticed. The talent or lack of talent is in the quality of that stand or choice and the timing of those decisions. The attentive teacher knows this, as does the talented musician or actor. This is not to say that this is the only way that good improvisation can occur-it can also emerge out of a hostile and decidedly un-playful environment, but more on that later. The point I would like to make now is that even when the climate is right, or one thinks that the climate is right, good improvisation- the kind that furthers inquiry, works against reification, promotes consideration of the Other, interrogates standards, and promotes the process of creation- doesn't happen. For now, I would like to explore some of these situations in order to further our analysis of improvisation and its ability to transform institutions.

For many who practiced, performed, and trusted improv from its modern inception at the University of Chicago in the 1950's, and especially in the 1960's and 1970's, there was always the belief that this work would uncover a greater truth or a series of greater truths. Despite this belief, much of the joy experienced by the players and audience was derived from the tension that came from their playing with power structures-the have-nots giving it to the haves, so to speak, since few truths were being uncovered. But this was a joy without merit, since there was never any intention to disrupt those power structures. In reality these improvisations were nothing more than the boss showing everyone what a good sport he was by taking a "pie to the face."

Boundaries may have been blurred in this play with power structures, but the rules that justified those power structures remained intact. Again, I turn to Rancière (2009) who writes, "...It often leads to a different form of stultification, which uses the blurring of boundaries and the confusion of roles to enhance the effect of the performance without questioning its principles" (p. 21). In other words, the power structures could never be disrupted since the logic that created them remained. There are many reasons why improvisation failed to achieve the type of social justice that should have undermined the institutions of patriarchy, racism, sexual oppression, and class conflict, for example, called for by many who desired it in the fifties and sixties. Ultimately, professional improv's failure comes down to two things: its commercial success and eventual commodification, and ironically its central tenet of trusting the group mind. Never deny. Commodification separated the audience and performers by narrowing the audience's role, which only allowed for spectatorship, and the performer's role, reduced to entertainer. The relational intelligence that could have developed between these two

groups never happened because it wasn't given a chance. The group mind that was being trusted was in most cases heterosexual, white, bourgeois, and male. In her well-researched examination of improvisational theatre from the 1950's through the rest of the century, Amy Seham (2001) was one of those people who hoped that improvisation could be both revelatory and revolutionary. She writes:

...Why not assume that improv would reflect the power dynamics of society as a whole? In part, because the powerful rhetoric of improv insists on process, mutual support, and individual liberation. In part, because so many intelligent, passionate, and sincere players believe in that rhetoric. In part, because women and people of color have historically found a voice through improvisational modes of cultural expression-including feminist theatre and jazz- but to the notable exclusion of improv (p. xviii).

Mainstream improv was unable to serve as a revolutionary force in contrast to jazz and feminist theatre, for reasons already mentioned, and also because the good of the group was sacrificed for the good of the star. The star was there to score and he did that by making people laugh- quickly and often. Importantly, Bakhtin's love of Rabelais' world and the transformative power of laughter that world possessed was not to be found on the stage of Second City, for example, or in its audience. Moreover, the truth that so many comedians, and lovers of comedians, see as an integral part of all jokes that work was not the truth of marginalized groups. Instead, it was the sentiment of a dominant group that felt threatened by something new. The laughter that was demanded by this audience reflected, supported, and nurtured a largely conservative view. Improv squandered its opportunity to speak truth to power by embracing the *nostalgic funny*. In other words, they used humor to reify traditional, norms regarding gender relations, and

heteronormativity, for example. Why did this happen? The reasons are many: Funny men got shows on television and some, film careers. And it happened because their audience wasn't necessarily white and male exclusively, but the sentiments that audience espoused and expected certainly were. The laughter that was sought and created in this environment usually came from a straight white male's back pocket instead of the Other. It lacked spontaneity. In his book on laughter, Henri Bergson (2005) wrote that it is "... a social gesture that singles out and represses a special kind of absentmindedness in men and in events" (p.43). This suggests that laughter was used as a type of check. A way to ensure that everyone was on the same page regarding what was funny and what wasn't funny. It was a laughter Brecht would have hated since it repressed the naïve in favor of the standard norm of funny. This was no time for innovation. Instead, the group mind of the actors and audience were calling the shots. An undeveloped and untapped group mind, which was nurtured by a popular culture they were either unwilling or unable to interrogate, and a "free market" that turned art into a commodity, chose to play it safe. Some might argue they were financially forced, or perhaps seduced, to play it safe. Still, they blew it. All that intense immediacy that was there for the improv artist to consider: the desire to play, the entire "there" that is contained in a live event had been squandered. We might have appeared hip and knowing (I should know, I was part of that experience) but in reality we could have used a more humbling experience. We could have allowed for more play, taken more risks, fallen on our faces more often. Perhaps the audience could have allowed some experimentation, if only they had experienced some of the joy that comes from a successful experiment. We could have allowed for more naiveté-the kind sought by Brecht. But as crowds started to form and cash registers started to ca-

ching, the audience reverted to their role of consumer and the players turned their craft and sporadic art into product. The voice of the people isn't always wise, yet their adoration can be habit forming.

As improv evolved, especially during the eighties- when stand-up comedy was exploding, as was ticket sales- improv theatres around the country now contained their improvisational activities, within a faux competition. There would be teams, judges, scoring, timing, winners and losers. A sports minded public (used to their role of spectator) easily accepted the format, as did the improv troupes that appreciated the income and the minimization of risk: If improv has transformative capabilities, partially derived from experimentation, very little of that was in evidence during this time period. It was commonly accepted by the players/producers that audiences didn't want to be challenged nor be privy to the process of creation that sometimes appears within a spontaneous act. We were told that audiences wanted to be entertained (as if that statement alone was enough). Since entertainment is a subjective term, open to many different interpretations, it was ironic that the variety of entertainment was being decreased rather than increased. The audiences seemed to want to be shortchanged in this regard and we delivered!

Things might have been different. In the beginning of the improv movement in the 1950's an improv piece had been developed known as the "Harold." It was essentially a group scene, which evolved slowly. Some "Harolds" could last for an hour, sometimes much longer. This scene incorporated many diverse and seemingly unrelated elements, some of which were suggested spontaneously by the audience while the players introduced others. All of these elements had to be justified in some way that was organic



to the nascent scene. At times a natural humor emerged from the scenes but the humor was never forced or pre-written. One of the challenges of the “Harold” was to make a suggestion seem right by working it in to the scene even if the suggestion seemed “wrong.” It didn’t matter; you had to make it “right.” The Harold forced you to not write the scene in your head before its creation. This game is the closest we would come to improvisation and a prime example of the pragmatic action described earlier by Pinar. Moreover, the players and the audience had to really pay attention. When everything clicked it was an amazing sight to behold and be a part of. Mediocre television star and alumnus of Second City in Chicago Jim Belushi (younger brother of tragic comedian John) maintained that he enjoyed a good “Harold” better than sex. Assuming his sex life was adequate his statement gives us a glimpse into the improvisational and seemingly magical qualities of the Harold. While it was common for the players and audience to, at times, react in awe while the Harold was unfolding, especially if the scene was going well, it was more often the case that the scene evolved into chaos and the audience felt shortchanged. When the Harold was *working* it was in part a result of the highly honed improvisational skills of the player’s and the attentiveness they displayed toward their ongoing scene that was also in some ways a suggestion for a scene to come. It is perhaps the tensionality between the scene and the scene to come that gave the scene its vibrancy and eliminated the “pedagogical stance,” which inculcates passivity in the spectator as it paradoxically attempts to do the opposite. Also, it was a function of the observational and participatory skills honed by an audience who let go of their cloak of passive spectatorship and fulfilled their dialogical responsibilities as viewer. In this way the Harold served the same function as the sculpture of the UN playground I discussed earlier

in chapter 3 by Noguchi and described by Appelbaum (2012). It's hard to fully know why the Harold was perceived as magical. One possible explanation could be that the players and audience found themselves having fun as they took part in the joy of creation. For example, even when the scenes were not particularly funny, they were immensely rewarding to watch and take part in since so much of the joy of the scene was in its *unfolding*. I've mentioned this joy in an earlier chapter with my discussion of the German term *funktionslust*. We thought we had found another path to creation. In reality, we had built upon a creative environment similar to the one described earlier by British director Peter Brook (2008) and Appelbaum (2012, 2013). We had participated in that dialogical encounter I referred to earlier by William Pinar (1994, 2006) and an opportunity to possibly create pragmatic action, although in retrospect I think the Harold was less pragmatic and more theoretical. Eventually two camps emerged: One that saw the beauty in the Harold as it evolved and another that resented the alleged formlessness, length, experimentation and sporadic humor. Although there was an audience for the Harold it was small in comparison to the growing audiences who wanted to laugh, and laugh often. During an era of Cold War, Vietnam, race riots and minority rights, for example, the last thing a white Christian public wanted was a pipeline to greater truths (since that issue had apparently already been settled). Instead, the 'silent majority' got a balm that soothed the souls of those who argued for the destruction of the Welfare State, and a mass theology that gave permission to personal gain at the expense of one's neighbor: Adorno's (1978) earlier dismissal of jazz was for similar reasons: He saw jazz not as a dialectical encounter, but as a pleasing diversion to the real struggle. As improv troupes morphed into ComedySportz or Improv Olympics, (two large companies who emphasized the

competition between teams of players) the creative process and environment (always intimately connected) became further constrained. Now, entertainment became the race to the punch line. A scene couldn't go for more than thirty seconds, sometimes less time, before the players felt an urgency to get to a punch line, any punch line. Often times this need to get to the punch line was at the expense of the group work that at one time was Improv's reason for being. All of us wanted to be that guy who got to the funny first, even if that meant stepping on someone's toes to get there. During this time period, when the funny promoted gender and ethnic norms (to name but a few standards), a small group of players felt the need to rebel. Although they were unable to use improvisation to challenge these norms while being working members of these "improvisational sports teams" many left and formed their own groups. These new groups looked very different. They tended to be all female or all African American. Some formed more specifically arranged groups, based on sexual orientation or class. One of the more successful groups came out of the Chicago improv scene in the early nineties. They were an all female group and called themselves, "Jane." As part of this group's performances, ...actors sometimes began a scene in one gender, only to be endowed in mid-gesture as another...The Janes reveled in these moments of incongruity...The key is not to reject the seeming error in proper gender performance, but to incorporate it as an integral part of the character in process. These are the moments when improvisation can interrupt the constant repetition of gender norms (Seham, 2001, p. 73).

Improv may have been integral to Jane's successful challenge of gender norms, as Seham maintains, or this group's success at challenging gender norms could be the result of Jane's initial decision to form an all female group in the first place. In other words,

since the members of Jane, and their audience, had experienced the group mind of the heterosexual, white, male, improv's alleged ability to challenge these norms might instead reflect a decision that had been made earlier, rather than one which emerged as a direct result of participating in or viewing an improvisational scene. The issue is whether or not Jane and the audience's laughter and overall enjoyment of Jane's performances were the byproducts of a catharsis of sorts, a validation of pre-existing sentiment, or the result of improv's transformative abilities. One may never know for sure. Seham (2001) writes that "...Jane member Jennifer Bills suggests that it is more fun for an audience to see a man lower his status to play a woman than to see a woman play a man..."(p. 71). An audience that has this kind of fun is an audience that retains an adherence to a conservative gender norm -just imagine the audience that enjoyed the "antics" of "Uncle Miltie" as he donned yet another dress during his reign of television in the 1950's, or the current cross dressing of Adam Sandler and my point will be clear. I would argue that the bulk of the audiences that enjoyed performances by Jane had already made up their minds regarding outdated gender norms and what Jane cast members created on stage was simply a validation of the audience's sentiment, not the consequence of their transformation as the result of watching or participating in an improv scene.

#### The Arena of Action

If improvisation isn't a weapon for justice in a free society, if improvisation is unable to transform or undermine some or all of a society's standards, why is it sometimes feared as a threat to authority in one that is mostly closed? This was one of the questions examined by anthropologist Laurie Frederik Meer (2007) who analyzed and took part in a type of theatre that had developed in Cuba called Playback

Theatre. As Meer explains Playback theatre had its roots in the larger Pan-Latin theatre developed or informed, in part, by “radical” pedagogues, such as Paulo Freire (2008) and Augusto Boal (2000) in the 1960’s and 1970’s: “...it was reminiscent of other types of people’s theatre, theatre of social action, or consciousness raising theatre around the world...” (Meer, 2007, p.107). The Cuban authorities had allowed Playback Theatre’s creation since it seemed to fit in well with Cuba’s claims of revolutionary art and collective action. The actors who participated in Playback Theatre did so because it seemed to offer

... a sense of psychological liberation from a society hyper-saturated with politics and political ideology, and in this way the movement is a radical art-radical in its ability to transcend society’s orthodoxy. In Cuba, the words and ideas of Marx, Lenin, Castro, and more recently, Hugo Chavez and Eva Morales hover in the air like a constant mist, absorbed by tired bones and minds aching for some sense of beauty and cultural transcendence...” (Meer, 2007, p. 110).

At the heart of Playback Theatre are individual stories, re-told through group improvisations. Importantly, the new stories, which emerged from these improvisations, had to be submitted to the state for approval before they could be re-told (performed) for an audience. All of the actors receive their salaries from the state so they had to abide by this rule. Meer writes that, “...Group improvisation is often used during the creative process of playwriting and production...*improvisations are never seen in public* (emphasis mine)...” (p. 115). The improvisations of these Cuban actors were feared despite the fact that since the Castro revolution, the general Cuban population, along with the intelligentsia, had developed a type of self-censorship that monitored and controlled

anti-government speak. But within the state imposed and self-guided censorship the clever had found room to maneuver and possibly subvert. At the very least they had found a space to linger within an overweening orthodoxy (and an underwhelming economy), clearly different in content yet similar to the severity of restrictions faced by the players in my previous discussion of the American improv scene. In contrast to the American improv players who succumbed to commodification, white reign, heteronormativity, and ego, the participants of Playback Theatre were able to use improvisation, in conjunction with the collective action claimed by the state, to tell authentic stories. These stories, as Meer discovered, while seemingly not changing Cuba's political structure, economy, or ethos, did provide a degree of catharsis for many of the participants (players and audience). It is likely that many Cubans would have gladly traded this catharsis for an improvement in infrastructure, living conditions, consumer items and food. It is understandable that the Cuban's experience in playback Theatre was cathartic, yet it is unclear if their experience was *only* cathartic. Perhaps we might gain some insight from a neo-Marxist perspective as it examines culture. In this context Henry Giroux (1983) writes that they, "...demonstrate that the mechanisms of social and cultural reproduction are never complete and are always faced with partially realized elements of opposition...a dialectical model of domination that offers valuable alternatives..." (p. 100). Perhaps the Cubans were able to engage in the previously mentioned dialogical encounter suggested by Pinar when they combined the "partially realized" state sanctioned goal of collective action, with the element of surprise which is an important component of improvisation, when they created their stories for Playback Theatre. Indeed, the Cuban participants of Playback Theatre benefited from the

solidarity, which was partially promoted by state ideology, their own inherent needs, and the central tenet of improvisation, when they produced authentic works of theatre that incorporated the use of improv. The authenticity of their stories was additionally bolstered by an unpredictability, which often comes from good improv. Ironically, a rigid pseudo Marxist environment was less restrictive than the “free” capitalist society encountered by the mainstream improv players in America. The latter could not move beyond the needs of the marketplace to produce works similar in authenticity to those created by Playback Theatre or the previously mentioned “Harold.” The Cuban players had taken part in a dialogical struggle between the legitimate needs of the group and the hollow claims of the state. Remarkably, these players were able to satisfy the authorities and some of their needs. To be sure, not an easy task! Poverty, state heavy handedness, and the “partially realized elements of opposition” of the state’s mechanisms of control, and the Cuban people’s desire for a better life, allowed the Cuban actors to hone their skills in creating subtle (and sometimes not so subtle) ways to psychologically and politically deceive the state. It was their time walking this tightrope of contradictions in conjunction with an incomplete state mechanism that gave the Cubans their cathartic experience and a critical perspective that comes from dialectical experience. In other words, while it might be easy for a state censor to remove part or all of an “anti-revolutionary” word, phrase, or speech from a script, it would be harder to cut out a nuanced raised eyebrow; an ironic physical gesture, or carefully placed silence from an attentive player or audience member during a performance. Out of necessity some Cubans became adept at experimentation and the subtleties of subversion. Importantly, it was the expectation of experimentation, which supported their successful improvisations.

Improvisation alone was not the cause of the Cuban's transformations, yet importantly, it was the Cuban's experience in experimentation- a literal fight for survival- that pre-disposed them to creating actual improvisation, in contrast to the limited type displayed on the stages of America's myriad improv clubs. No such struggle took place on the American stage since those players and audiences, for the most part, had accepted the capitalist state and its concomitant standards as legitimate, and having no hollow claims. It is for all of these reasons, in addition to the one suggested by Giroux, that the participants of Playback Theatre were able to create for themselves a place to linger...to be more human. If the neo-Marxists are right (and I think they are) and the mechanisms of reproduction are incomplete, then, these incomplete mechanisms and the dialogical struggle that followed are some of the reasons for the "partially realized" success of Playback Theatre to create catharsis and possibly more. It remains to be seen whether or not the Cuban's success of subversion within a theatrical context can foreshadow or contribute to subversion within a political or economic context. Ironically, the largely white performers of the American improv scene, during the 1950's through the 1980's, were more artistically constrained by the economic success, or *expectation of success*, of a white middle class, and the norms they embraced. They had less of an incentive to explore and subvert the "partially realized" and "realized" elements of a capitalist society that were in opposition to what should have been their actual goals. In other words, there was seemingly less to struggle against which might explain why players and audiences were less willing to experiment, seek and make use of surprise and truly improvise.



### “Disciplined Fantasy”

Like the Cubans of Playback Theatre who were able to use and develop a critical perspective partially because of their awareness of the hollow claims of the state, Duke Ellington’s status as an outsider because of racism, pre-disposed him toward creating and nurturing an equally potent critical perspective. When musicians, actors, teachers, and students, for example, have the opportunity to engage in improvisation, their improvisations are better if they are pre-disposed in viewing some or all of what is being offered to them for consideration with a critical eye. They gain experience and use experience to help them develop what Henry Giroux terms a “critical stance.” (1983) Such a stance is central to his goal of a “dialectical pedagogy,” (1983) similar to the dialogical encounter suggested earlier by Pinar. For Giroux, “...at the heart of the dialectic is a human agent who is never merely a passive being removed from the historical arena, but instead is an acting subject, who with qualitatively different levels of reasoning and action, appropriates and penetrates the reality in which he or she lives...” (p. 15). Improvisation alone is insufficient as a means of challenging a standard or a group of standards. This was certainly the case of the comedic improvisation of my earlier discussion. To be sure Ellington’s wealth and celebrity status gave him partial entry into a dominant white society, yet, as he and his musicians were forced to endure Jim Crow, Ellington was continuously reminded of his outsider status. This condition gave him both a reason and a vantage point that enabled Ellington to criticize the norms of his day. Thus, when he and his fellow musicians would improvise they were more willing to interrogate the musical standards that had come before- and infuse them with their unique life experiences- than the previously mentioned comedic improvisations of

the American scene. In this way their improvisations and compositions were filled with more risk taking, and the impact these improvisations had on the musicians and Ellington would encourage even further risks in their music. For example, when Duke Ellington's mother died he went into seclusion, removing himself from his hectic schedule of touring and writing music, and severely limiting his interaction with his friends. Months later, when he emerged from his self-imposed exile, he gave his musicians a new score to record. It was called "Reminiscing in Tempo" and was roughly twelve minutes in length- a long jazz song for its day to record- comprising four sides of the recording medium of the time. The writer James Baldwin, upon hearing the recorded piece, called it a "disciplined fantasy." While I'm not completely sure what Baldwin meant I would like to think the gifted writer picked up on the dialectical nature of Ellington's music as well as its beauty and rhythm, although I am not suggesting that dialectics and beauty are mutually exclusive, far from it! The band and his score were mournful but not maudlin. Ellington's genius allowed him to acknowledge his grief-which was immense- yet compose a score (analytical and embodied) so transcendent as to abstractly suggest a musical future yet to come-both ours and his- while turning his present moment truth into art and further bolstering Buber's claim of "meeting." In other words Ellington's grief (his present moment truth) "met" his musical expertise; His band "met" a new challenging score, which also allowed for improvisation. Much of the score's beauty and vitality comes from the improvisations of Ellington's carefully selected musicians. His talent as a composer (although in jazz perhaps group composition would be more accurate) was in part due to his ability to choose the right musicians and "tease out" of them their best work. He understood the need for rigidity and lack of rigidity. He

understood the importance of the creative environment previously mentioned by Brook. And it is within Ellington's musical framework that his musician's improvisations were encouraged, expected, and fully realized.

I re-tell this anecdote, fairly well known among jazz lovers, because not only is it an example of the pragmatic action sought by Pinar, but because it contains much of what has inspired many who find in jazz not only great music but a way out of an immutable culture. For example, curriculum scholar Ted Aoki (2005), in his conversations with jazz trumpeter Bobby Shew, was able to extrapolate Shew's approach to his instrument and his music and apply that way of thinking and being to his study and practice of Curriculum . As Aoki sought the additional advice of an ice skater and visual artist (Brian Orson and Elysia Drywan), with Shew's help he had come, "...to better understand the generative although ambiguous, ambivalent space between this or that, between planned curriculum and live(d) curriculum ..." (p. 421-422). Like the talented theatrical improv player or teacher who makes the best use of her moment, these two men and woman validated for Aoki what he perhaps knew to be true of a live(d) curriculum , even as far back as his classroom experience as a young teacher in the 1940's. A "planned curriculum " – the currently preferred method for most "experts" in the field of education- is a curriculum that is already dead in the water. In contrast, a live(d) curriculum , is filled with the possibility of a transformative experience for its participants and the content they are seriously playing with, since the standards and the *urgency* of creating something wonderful right away (by making use of and being impacted by improvisation) often stimulate and fertilize one another. Through his conversations with a visual artist, jazz musician, and ice skater, all of whom incorporate

some improvisation in their art, Aoki was able to move beyond the limited educational world that strictly adheres to standards, lesson plans, learning objectives and the like. Perhaps the practitioners of “educational leadership” would be surprised to learn that these standards and practices are not abandoned but potentially improved. When improv works it is because its practitioners have mastered the standards while incorporating some of what life has thrown their way-the good and the bad- in order to “meet” the standards, interrogate them, and revise according to their present moment truth. In other words, the desire to create something new forces one to interrogate a standard or a series of standards with a focus and ferocity that improves it without negating a part or whole of a standard which works. Ellington was a well-respected musician, composer, and bandleader, making a good living during the nation’s worst depression. He could have churned out an endless string of swing numbers (the popular music of his day), no different from the ones that initially garnered him praise and respect and the public would have eagerly consumed them. But had he done that he would have been artistically and personally dishonest. His work would have lacked authenticity. Ellington was willing to risk losing much of his fan base by recording works like *Reminiscing in Tempo* but did it anyway. Baldwin’s label of “disciplined fantasy” was high praise since the hardest thing for most improvisational artists to do, who are going outside the normal framework, is to produce a work of balance, grace, (and in the case of jazz), swing, while merging many seemingly disparate elements-both old and new- in an attempt to create something wonderful right away. It is for these reasons perhaps that scholars like Aoki find in jazz music, and the musicians who play it, an actual and metaphorical model of being, and it is this way of being that is potentially useful to the Curriculum scholar or student.

Indeed, it is ironic that many of those who routinely criticize jazz for its formlessness or ahistorical nature; for its patent disregard for tradition (read: standard) would perhaps be surprised to learn that the majority of jazz musicians, rather than ignoring all of that which came before them musically, hold the standards to such a high regard that they are continuously willing to interrogate them and subject them to constant reinterpretation. I would argue that this type of adherence and devotion to the standards is preferable to the blind devotion practiced by so many. One does not need to look far to find musicians or “educators” willing to demonstrate their blind devotion to the standards. A weekend in Biloxi, Branson, or Vegas will easily demonstrate this fact; or any class within the current field known as “educational leadership.” Indeed, those who promote standards without subjecting them to the type of scrutiny and analysis common to most jazz musicians, and improvisational artists, do them a disservice, as they take whatever was vital and appropriate for the time and render them impotent. Formal and informal conversations with jazz musicians of the last half-century support this view. For example British musician and author, Derek Bailey (1993) writes:

...The repertoire of a jazzman such as Dexter Gordon or Lee Konitz, for instance, contains probably a fairly small number of different ‘songs’. But they will provide an adequate working context, perhaps for a lifetime. Within these boundaries there is a continuous process of renewal in which old material is re-shaped and adjusted, sometimes rejected, and new material introduced. ‘If I do an hour show, if I’m extremely fertile, there will be about fifteen minutes of pure ad-lib. But on an average, it’s about four or five minutes. But the fact that I’ve created it in ad-lib seems to give it a complete feeling of free form’ (p. 48-49).

Toward the end of this passage Bailey is quoting the great alto saxophonist Lee Konitz, who speaks for many jazz players as he discusses improv and its ability to refresh a standard tune while retaining some or most of what made that standard great in the first place. In Paul Berliner's mammoth study of jazz, (1994) he interviews scores of great musicians many of whom echo this sentiment. For example, Herbie Hancock, the great pianist of Miles Davis's 1960s quintet recalls:

What I was trying to do and what I feel they were trying to do was to combine – take these influences that were happening to all of us at the time and amalgamate them, personalize them in such a way that when people were hearing us, they were hearing the avant-garde, on one hand, and they were hearing the history of jazz that led up to it on the other hand – because Miles was that history. He was that link. We were sort of walking a tightrope with the kind of experimenting we were doing in music, not total experimentation, but we used to call it controlled freedom (p. 341).

Davis, like Ellington, could have rested on his laurels after releasing his seminal *Kind of Blue* (1959), the bestselling jazz record in history, in the early sixties. Instead, he continuously pushed himself and expected the highest level of artistic creativity from his band mates, all of whom held a tenuous but respectful connection with the past, while searching for a possible musical future to come. Hancock's description of this time as "controlled freedom" mirrors Baldwin's assessment of Ellington's piece mentioned earlier as "disciplined fantasy." These musicians intuitively understand the importance of Pinar's "dialogical encounter" and Giroux's "dialectical pedagogy." Thus, despite what some people think they hear when they listen to jazz, this is not music where anything

goes. Indeed, the majority of great jazz musicians are required to master a rich, deep, oral and written tradition- a tradition that at times is comprised of an amalgamation of standard tunes. The issue is how they incorporate that tradition in a very demanding, ambiguous, present moment that beckons the attentive musician to discover something new through improvisation: The music that emerges may be only partially improvised and contain elements from the musician's "bag of tricks," licks and phrases within the idiom that have worked in the past. The point I wish to stress, and the point that is repeated by countless musicians, is that even when the musician creates a small amount of improvisation, relative to the length of the standard song, most of them feel that the piece as a whole is enhanced as a result of that improvisation. Whether or not this enhancement results in transcendence is debatable. Still, the musician is given an opportunity to dwell in what Aoki (2005) has termed as a "generative" and "ambiguous space." No guarantees but certainly the potential for transformative work.

### Afterthoughts

I have shown how improvisation alone, without an environment called for by Brook and a participant(s) with a critical stance as described by Giroux, is incapable of transforming a standard or a series of standards. Since I have experience as an improviser, and work as a high school history teacher, it is only natural to reflect on those times when I “teased out” my student’s reactions to the material by consciously avoiding the rigidly defined roles of “teacher” and “student”. Instead, I made an attempt to “meet” my students in the way in which I think Buber originally intended. These “meetings” inspired by the writings of Aoki and Ayers were experienced infrequently perhaps because the majority of my students had been so conditioned to adhere to the rules and behaviors as created by our institution and peer groups. Initially, my deviations from the norm of lecturer and “expert” were misunderstood and the student’s reactions would often be uncomfortable laughter, silence, or bemusement. In time, we were able to use and participate in our present moment truth as a means for further inquiry. At no time did I observe the students questions or comments approach anything that would have led me to believe that they were capable of interrogating our subject to such an extent that the consequence of that action would be a transformation on an ontological level. I also spoke with students in five honors English classes, so that I might inquire about their feelings (interesting that I didn’t use the term thoughts) regarding improvisation in the classroom. I selected this particular English class to speak with because their teacher routinely uses a few improvisational games in her class once a week (Monday is improv day). It should be pointed out that she is the only teacher to use improvisational games in the classroom at our school on a regular basis. According to this teacher, the way in



which she uses improv in the class is by acting out vocabulary words and terminology so that we can ‘see’ words. On vocab [sic] day, I give a pre-assessment. We discuss words and then do different types of improv with them. At class end, students go back to assessment and fill in what they have learned. The students are required to learn eight words to keep doing improv.

In this manner she uses improv as a reward and the students clearly view their time doing improv as a fun break from the routine of “school,” although one student acknowledged that doing improv, “ helps me remember my vocabulary forever; it is also easier for me to learn. Once I do my improv, that’s all I do for my test. It reinforces state standards because we are learning the vocab set out by state.” None of the English class participants that I spoke with stated that using improv in the classroom critiqued let alone transformed the standards. Instead, everyone I talked to agreed that improvisation in the classroom made learning “fun,” “more efficient,” and improved long-term memory. In conversations with the teacher she said that at no time did she recall any student questioning the list of state mandated vocabulary or commenting that the list is too narrowly focused, incomplete, or ill conceived. Instead, these students simply accept the state standard as legitimate and therefore important to know. In some ways they are reminiscent of the American improv scene I previously described and are therefore a reminder to me and others that are concerned with social justice and in favor of a radical pedagogy, that improv alone is insufficient as a weapon for meaningful change.

## CHAPTER 7

### BRILLIANT MISTAKES AND SERIOUS PLAY: BEYOND PERFORMATIVITY AND A COOKBOOK CURRICULUM

There is a sign on the wall of the guidance counselor's office at the school where I teach that reads, "Begin with the end in mind." The author of this ubiquitous directive is Stephen R. Covey (1989) and this quote comes from his hugely popular book, *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*. Covey's directive and the school's blind endorsement are symptomatic of a larger problem facing schools, and the teachers and students who are attempting their way toward a wider education within the confines of these institutions. From a theoretical perspective, part of the problem is due to a misunderstanding of scientific knowledge, empiricism, and the impact this misreading has on the production and acceptance of more general meta-narratives. Instead of viewing scientific knowledge as mutable, local, and the product of an arbitrary consensus that is tainted by commodification (Lyotard, 1984) (Rouse, 1987), or informed by local needs (Blake, et al, 1998) it is viewed as neutral, value free, factual, and immutable (Britzman, 2003). Teachers, administrators, and students are unknowingly (and partially knowingly) suffering within and perpetuating a performative culture (informed by this meta-narrative) that values an efficient way of learning an uninterrogated standard- imposed and legitimated from an external authority -that is understood as immutable and thus permanent. If critical thinking, spontaneity, improvisation, and creativity are brought up as valuable to one's education, it is usually only if they can be used as an effective way to learn "standards" that have become entrenched and enshrined. As criticism of this problem has grown, viable theoretical solutions have been stuck in an epistemological morass which fluctuates between an unsatisfying relativism, Zen- koan, or an over

simplistic positivist empiricism, the latter of which is nurtured through a series of dominant discourses which are based on the already mentioned, misunderstood scientific model. Practical solutions have fared somewhat better yet still; most classrooms and the activity within succumb to the momentum of the times: A performative system that values efficiency, clear objectives, and easy assessment is the unfortunate norm. It is appealing to politicians, teachers and administrators who wish to demonstrate progress toward learning objectives and a convenient, albeit illusory, means of accountability. In this chapter I discuss good teaching, improvisation, and performativity. I discuss the largely negative aspects of performativity that have been brought to our attention by Lyotard, (1984), Cherryholmes (1988) and others. And I examine the possibility of agency which emerges out of an alternative version of performativity that come from scholars such as Judith Butler (2007) J. Hillis Miller (2007), Karen Barad (2003), and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (2003) and in conjunction with those who have written about improvisation within jazz and dramaturgical settings, in my attempt to promote a richer experience in the classroom.

We may inhabit a postmodern/poststructural/posthuman world but the forces that propel the “professional inertia” (Cherryholmes, 1988, p. 31) responsible for so much of what takes place in our schools can be traced back to the model of success that was first suggested by Frederick Winslow Taylor as he sought to maximize production in factories by eliminating all wasted motions from the workers. Simply extrapolate Taylor’s paradigm as education policy makers have done and apply it to our schools and a fundamental problem emerges: Teachers and students are encouraged to take a non-aporetic stance regarding learning objectives, since there seems to be no sense wasting

any time asking whether or not the standards being taught are worth knowing, for example, or expending any energy speculating on what isn't being promoted and why this is so. I teach a class created by the College Board called Advanced Placement in United States History. The College Board created this class in part to serve as an educational bulwark against the Soviet Union during the early years of the Cold War. They view their product (at \$91 per test given to roughly 340,000 students worldwide every year it is indeed a product) as the "gold standard" of survey classes in United States History. But the class is flawed: In their attempt to cover the history of the United States from the time of the end of the last Ice Age to the present day, they have been forced to leave out much of what has happened. The scope is wide yet the depth remains shallow. One might argue that this is the result of historiography (which *can* explain the emphasis on some subjects and the omission of others); or the nature of all survey classes, however, I would argue that much of what the College Board has created is the result of a performative approach that generally accepts a standard narrative. Within this narrow context, power only flows from the top down. Indeed, a large portion of our time is spent examining the strengths and weaknesses of political leaders, or the impact of large scale traumatic events, such as war. Perhaps this is why our study of the Gilded Age is heavy with information about the Captains of Industry (Robber Barons) and light on the everyday life of the factory worker? But product *and process*, both intimately connected, are equally flawed! Indeed, when most teachers and administrators look for a method of teaching, and student learning, (usually, mistakenly understood as separate from one another) they often revert to Bloom's taxonomy. And when they describe this taxonomy it is with such high regard one would think they have discovered the secret path to all

knowledge, not an arbitrary, albeit comprehensive for its time, way of learning about a subject. Product and process have been corrupted by an inaccurate epistemology, itself a product of our performative culture. As Cherryholmes has argued in her seminal book, *Power and Criticism* (1988) schools are operating with certainty regarding a “transcendental signifier” that in actuality doesn’t exist and are thus being guided by a meta-narrative which is incomplete, misleading, and most incriminating, unable to produce a real education. He cites many examples of the performative culture which have given rise to this practice as he writes how a

Vulgar pragmatism results when efficiency is pursued in the absence of criticism, when actions are privileged over thought, when practice is valued and theory disparaged, when practice is divorced from theory (as if that were possible) for the sake of making things work ‘better.’...this is the thrust of educational reform proposals that place increasing reliance upon testing in assessing educational outcomes. Standardized achievement tests thereby become the standard against which student, teacher, school, and system performance is evaluated. The task is to raise test scores. Efficiency is the underlying issue (p. 152).

The administrators who run the school, like middle managers from a Sinclair Lewis (1922) novel, revel in small percentage gains made each year on a litany of standardized tests. At one point Newsweek magazine placed our school in the top one hundred schools *in the country* (emphasis mine) based on the number of students *enrolled* (again emphasis mine) in Advanced Placement courses. From my perspective we are deluding ourselves if we think we have created a great school. Unfortunately, I seem to be in the minority. When asked on surveys, the majority of teachers and students

maintain that our school is a “great place to learn” and they “feel supported by the learning environment.” These naïve sentiments are echoed across the pond as reported by Anne Storey (2007) who teaches at the Open University in the UK. Her article is on an important cultural shift that has taken place within the teaching profession in England. Alarming, many new teachers are entering the field from a background of mid level managerial positions, outside of the world of education. Although they are being pushed out of their old professions because of changes within the economy, their placement as teachers is being promoted as a coup for education since their “skills” as managers are seen as directly applicable to and desirable in the classroom. Like the United States, England is placing emphasis on “...defining and ‘managing’ the performance of teachers” (Storey, 2007, p. 253). In many respects hiring people who have spent the majority of their professional lives dealing with targets, objectives, and assessments makes them an easier group to manage, and *train to become teachers*, especially since this managing and training is done with a language they are already familiar with and accepting of: performativity. It should therefore come as no surprise that when asked to reflect on their performance as a student teacher in the classroom one student reported that, “The targets of the sections were clear and the objectives met. My mentor supported me to ensure that they passed off smoothly. I afterwards evaluated these teaching experiences with my mentor and the feedback was mainly positive-with ideas about things I could improve for the next lesson” (Storey, 2007 p. 262). While Storey acknowledges (by reiterating Foucault’s explication of power) that the type of control exhibited through these new teachers is problematic since “...control has become internalized and more insidious” (p. 268), she maintains that

the findings of this study challenge the more pessimistic versions of the performativity critique. The Associates were at relative ease with targets and with evaluations of their performance. At the same time they expressed a strong value commitment to creativity in their lessons and had aspirations for a rounded education for their pupils. They do not appear to have become reduced to ‘commoditized’ actants (p. 268).

While it is true that the participants in the program of teacher training analyzed by Storey claim that, “...it was relational skills and creative ways to engage with pupils that featured in the data as paramount for these embryonic teachers” (p. 267) significantly, none of those creative ways went beyond figuring out seemingly innovative ways to help the students engage with the material so as to “master” the content. None of their creative energy examined why specific content was on the educational menu or if that content could be at all reinterpreted. Indeed, one of these creative approaches was to use a *PowerPoint presentation* (sarcastic emphasis mine) to “teach” the students about American minimalist composers while another teacher created an, “...’electrical circuit of bodies with pupils representing the electrons...I realized how much the pupils enjoyed this kind of activity and how much they learned from it. I accept that this is not possible for all lessons...but it fired the children’s enthusiasm” (p. 267). Unfortunately, the experiences described by Storey seem to be the norm when creativity in the classroom is discussed. It is noteworthy that the teachers in Storey’s essay made no attempt to question the selection of the content, its veracity, or its use at this particular stage of development, and it is here where the “definition” of teacher and “teaching” is revealed and “defined:” Teachers teach by passing along pre-packaged lessons with little or no

attempt made at questioning either the choice of content, developmental or historical relevance, or any flaws within the content itself. Creative approaches are limited to the *process* of engaging the students so that they can first swallow whole, and then regurgitate the material, and nothing more. Indeed, as was the case with their lesson on American musical minimalism, there appeared to be no attempt to place this type of music within an historical or musical context; or one that was relevant or directly flowing from the experiences of the students. The lesson on electrons seemed to suffer from a similar disconnect. The “fun” had by the students as they were pretending to be electrons was mostly due to the non-traditional approach of conveying the information along what is still an assembly line of limited, controlled, knowledge distribution. This *fun* is a far cry from the *serious play* I discuss. The performative culture which values efficiency and controlled access to information hasn’t got time or the ethical will to give students a more complete education since that would require doing more than paying lip-service to a student’s personalized education. Unfortunately at my school, when administrators discuss personalized education they are referring to a student using a computer program called “Edgeinuity” (the “clever” juxtaposition of education and ingenuity), a marginally interactive program that force-feeds and assesses the content at a student’s pace until the content is “mastered” when a passing grade is achieved on a common assessment. In many ways it is nothing more than an alternative type of panopticon (observing both student and teacher) since a record is made which captures the time spent on the program by both teacher and student, and, equally insidious, a way of controlling what information is dispensed to the student.



Of course, it's not as if we haven't been warned or given a better alternative to what exists on the current educational plate. In the *School and Society* (2001) John Dewey explained long ago to those concerned with education, as the industrial paradigm was just being applied to public schools, of the importance of placing experience above performative needs when he wrote:

The question of the relation of the school to the child's life is at bottom simply this: Shall we ignore this native setting and tendency, dealing, not with the living child at all, but with the dead image we have erected, or shall we give it play and satisfaction? If we once believe in life and in the life of the child, then will all the occupations and uses spoken of, then will all history and science, become instruments of appeal and materials of culture to his imagination, and through that to the richness and orderliness of his life. Where we now see only the outward doing and the outward product, there, behind all visible results, is the readjustment of mental attitude, the enlarged and sympathetic vision, the sense of growing power, and the willing ability to identify both insight and capacity with the interests of the world and man... When nature and society can live in the schoolroom, when the forms and tools of learning are subordinated to the substance of experience, then shall there be an opportunity for this identification, and culture shall be the democratic password (p. 39).

There are, of course, many in education, especially those who have written in the wake of the reconceptualization, (none, unfortunately at the national or state level who make policy), who have taken Dewey's warnings and advice seriously as they suggest ways to counteract some of the negative performative aspects within education, and

privilege the “substance of experience.” Carol Wild (2011) is the Course Director of the MA Art Practice and Education courses at Birmingham City University in the UK. She is aware of what is not being taught when performative efficiency is privileged at the expense of the student’s experience. Wild borrows one of Foucault’s suggestions and has created in her classrooms “heterotopias... a place that represents, contests and reverses culture by allowing difference...spaces which contradict the other spaces that we occupy...” (p. 424). Wild seems to imply that art education, in contrast to so-called more academic courses like Science or English, lends itself to the creation of these heterotopias, however I think the case could be made that many academic disciplines could create similar heterotopias. The sacred place she has created to contest our performative culture is an art gallery. Wild maintains that the art student’s experience of touring the art in a gallery, unplanned and ambiguous, unencumbered by the din of assessable data, and writing about one’s experience after the fact, can create “...moments that cannot be planned for in advance but are recognized with hindsight...” (p. 430). She further maintains that the learning, which emerges from these narrative reflections on those moments, is substantially more valuable than one that might be the product of a planned objective and its accompanying common assessment. Perhaps one of the reasons why Wild’s heterotopia produced a more valuable learning experience is because the sacred space that was created was an incomplete space, similar to the incomplete set design described by British theatrical director Peter Brook in *The Empty Space* (2008). Instead of rows of chairs arranged in straight lines, with an authority figure positioned behind a podium dispensing information like a flight attendant passing out stale peanuts,

Brook's "incomplete design" forces the participant to engage with her environment, impacting eventually the play itself as well as the participant. As Brook has explained:

what is necessary... is an incomplete design; a design that has clarity without rigidity; one that could be called 'open' as against 'shut.' This is the essence of theatrical thinking: a true theatre designer will think of his designs as being all the time in motion, in action, in relation to what the actor brings to a scene as it unfolds. In other words, unlike the easel painter, in two dimensions, or the sculptor in three, the designer thinks in terms of the fourth dimension, the passage of time (p. 101-102).

Brooks' actors, similar in concept to the living child referred to by Dewey, were able to create a more vibrant theatrical production because the substance of each actor's experience was allowed to contribute to an incomplete set design that in turn created a more realistic, lively production. Instead of forcing each actor to learn her lines, hit her mark and be done with it, each actor was able to bring to the set something that was uniquely theirs *in time*, that is to say as the rehearsals evolved and the scenes unfolded, and then add that information to the design of the set, and consequently the play itself. What might be achieved if classrooms, and the students and teacher within, could evolve in a similar fashion? Imagine how much overall learning could be enhanced if standards and learning objectives were viewed with the same clarity and lack of rigidity as Brook afforded his actors, their set, and ultimately the play. Students and teachers are rarely given the opportunity to engage with the material and one another in the classroom this thoroughly, and without the encouraged passivity that passes for education these days. As Wild's art students experienced the gallery, and reflected on that experience within the

gallery (also an incomplete design but with “clarity”), they were able to view the art on display with a gaze that combined the art skills they were being taught and the ambiguous substance of their experiences up to that point, in real time. It makes sense that Wild views what occurred in this space as preferable to one that treats them as if they were all the same, passively learning (an oxymoron to be sure) a variety of art techniques from her, since what was eventually gained by the students far surpassed that which they would have learned under the current performative model which values efficiency of learning an uninterrogated standard. The very real creative participation of the actors and students, (in contrast to the “creative” method of teaching previously mentioned by Storey) (2007), and their concomitant impact on *theory* and practice, contributed to a wider, fluid, deeper, education of the art students and a more vibrant theatre, in contrast to the few times a limited, controlled, creativity is allowed in the classroom, because *the unanticipated* intelligent responses of the students and actors were encouraged –*given time to emerge*- and incorporated in both cases. These responses enhanced the “standards” the students encountered because they were able to alter those standards as they saw fit, in real time. This approach to education is a preferable alternative to a destructive pedagogy, which treats the students as passive, inanimate objects, instead of one in which both students and the material can benefit as both evolve.

The limited, deformed, experience afforded most teachers and students in the UK and the U.S.A. and other “developed” nations is in contrast to what Julie White (2006), a faculty member of the University of Melbourne, is attempting to achieve in her classes which train future primary and secondary school teachers. White (2006) acknowledges that, “... Australian school systems are increasingly subjected to performative

requirements in the form of political control and bureaucratic imperative...” (p. 438).

Despite this constrictive environment, White has built upon the work of N.K. Denzin, Deborah Britzman (2006) and others and suggests a different version of performativity that contains within it the opportunity for agency. White tells us that, “...Denzin distinguishes between performativity as the ‘doing’ and performance as the ‘done’ (p. 437). Consequently, she has developed an approach to teacher training which focuses on the “doing,” that on the surface might seem unusual: Rather than a typical teacher training program which would require the students to create a weeks’ worth of lesson plans, (filled with objectives, references to standards, common, formative, and summative assessments) for example, she had her students create an operatic aria, complete with narrative story, singing, and choreography. White knows that the finished product will be rough since none of the participants come to the program with expertise in any of those skills. For her, this is beside the point. White is less concerned with the finished product because she argues that pedagogy is advanced when the doing is privileged above the done. Citing Britzman’s writings on teaching (2006) she argues that important pedagogical information and insights are potentially realized from the collaborative struggle by the participants as they negotiate the unknown. White maintains: “...The learning involved in becoming a teacher is a complex combination of the theoretical, the practical, the personal and the political. Coming to terms with dichotomies of the emotional and the intellectual, power and powerlessness, knowledge and ignorance, as well as an overriding concern with subjectivity characterizes emergent teachers...” (p. 439). Indeed, their struggle to create a reasonable facsimile of an operatic aria put them well beyond their comfort zones, forcing them to collaborate (a struggle in

itself) as they strained, and thus perhaps *experienced many of the characteristics* White cites as important to “emergent teachers.” In other words, she could have told them something similar to this information using the traditional transfer method of dispensing information. Importantly, White knows that the pedagogical impact will be more powerful if the participants struggle to come to these conclusions, (changed themselves because of the participants activity) on their own. Equally important in her iteration of performativity is her hope that her study will impact other education courses so that they will come to know that the, “...process of collaborative creation being valued more highly if not equally to the end point products...” (p. 449), will in the end create a pedagogy less controlled by bureaucratic necessity, efficiency, alleged accountability, sacred standards and more in line with her creative interpretation of performativity, that in effect becomes a type of praxis. This newfound pedagogy will be found to better serve the honest needs of students and teachers: That is to say, one that cares more about the educational growth of students without sacrificing the clarity of content.

### Performativity, Paralogy, and Serious Play

Those who expectedly find fault within the controlled, constrained, content of a performative culture might gain some solace in Lyotard’s (1984) idea of scientific paralogy, since it contains a destabilizing element in its pursuit of scientific truths. Under this scenario boundaries would be more fluid and thus standards would not appear as immutable as formerly thought since an objective truth(s) would be continually nurtured, critiqued, and improved. Consequently, pedagogy could be improved within this performative approach since mutable standards would encourage a more attentive, open-ended approach to education, perhaps akin to that described and desired by Dewey

(2001) as he discussed the “living child.” But as Joseph Rouse (1987) has reminded us in his book, *Knowledge and Power*, the artifacts that are the products of scientific investigations, as well as the impetus behind those investigations, come not from a place of general objectivity but are instead specific to the unique conditions of a broadly understood laboratory and what is done locally. And in Ball (2003) and Meng (2009) the authors argue that Lyotard’s version of paralogy is revealed as less destabilizing and more conservative as previously thought since the social paralogy (itself manipulated by corporate interests), which informs and controls the scientific investigation, can undermine scientific paralogy’s ability to subvert. Thus, if science is to contribute to a more realistic and truthful epistemology, which in turn can contribute to a healthier educational practice, then people who are scientifically literate must reconsider the ways in which they view and use the processes and products of scientific investigations. In other words the products and processes of science cannot be viewed in isolation. Instead, they must be viewed as part of a powerful social fabric so that the influence of that fabric can be understood. For only then does social paralogy have a chance to ask the important questions and begin investigating what was previously thought as unimportant. It is important to note, however, that none of this is possible without minimizing the mostly negative effects of commodification and fact denial (making this a seemingly daunting task) as the driving force behind or preventing, scientific investigations. In *Knowledge and Power*, Joseph Rouse (1987) offers a nuanced and intelligent perspective on scientific understanding that I would argue contributes to a more accurate ontology and will suggest an analysis of scientific practice that reveals the local, existential character of the understanding it produces. Scientific knowledge is first and

foremost knowing one's way about in the laboratory (or clinic, field site, etc.).

Such knowledge is of course transferable outside the laboratory into a variety of situations. But this transfer is not to be understood in terms of the instantiation of universally valid knowledge claims in different particular settings by applying bridge principles and plugging in particular local values for theoretical variables. It must be understood in terms of the adaptation of one local knowledge to create another. We go from one local knowledge to another rather than from universal theories to their particular instantiations (p. 73).

Karen Barad (2003), a feminist theorist most closely associated with her theory of "agential realism," acknowledges Rouse's influence on her writings, and interestingly adapts Bohr's work in quantum physics to describe an epistemology that she claims avoids the misunderstandings of scientific product and process previously mentioned, and the pitfalls of representationalism (closely related to the former and the dominant discourse informing and being informed by our standards) seen in both scientific realism and social constructivism. Moreover, regarding performativity, she critiques the Austinian idea (and by extension Butler's) that to say something is to do something, not because she seemingly disagrees with Austin or Butler on a fundamental level, but rather, because she wishes to end the privileging of words over materiality as either explication or agents of change. For Barad, matter matters at least as much as doing things with words (although the tensionality between matter and words is important a detailed analysis is beyond the scope of this chapter). She offers a unique epistemology, and thus an interesting version of performativity, that might shed some light on why the previously mentioned sacred space of Wild's (2011) heterotopia, or Brook's (2008) vibrant theatre,



or White's (2006) "opera" were able to contribute to a more honest, fuller, experience in the art classroom, theatre, and teacher training, respectively. For a better understanding of Barad's (2003) take on performativity we must first look at her argument regarding materiality and its impact on theory and practice. Barad writes that:

This relational ontology is the basis for my post humanist performative account of the production of material bodies. This account refuses the representationalist fixation on 'words' and 'things' and the problematic of their relationality, advocating instead *a causal relationship between specific exclusionary practices embodied as specific material configurations of the world* (her emphasis)... This causal relationship between the apparatuses of bodily production and the phenomena produced is one of 'agential intra-action' (p. 814).

For Barad, words should be understood in the same manner that Rouse understood the products and processes of scientific investigations. That is to say, words are local, fluid, imbued with meanings by non-verbal cues, and the consequence of consensus. Words, separate from their relationship to the local environment, cannot be broadly interpreted and applied, since they do not represent an objective truth, with universal applications. Instead, they must be locally interpreted, seen as intertwined and better-imagined describing phenomena, which are, "...dynamic topological reconfigurings/entanglements/relationalities/(re)articulations..." (p. 818). This fascinating and complex iteration of performativity offers no easy theoretical or practical response to agency. Indeed, Barad writes that, "...Agency is not an attribute but the ongoing reconfigurings of the world..." (p. 818). In other words, agency isn't something we do at will; instead, agency is what we notice can be done if our skills at attentiveness

to the moment have been honed. Thus, in the context of Barad's complex take on performativity, the art student's experiences in Wild's "heterotopia" must be explained in ways which go far beyond art students touring a gallery, as if they were all empty canvases waiting to be brushed by paint from the same palette. On any given day these students bring with them a varied and sometimes contradictory set of emotions and physical manifestations all of which interact with a changing environment: There is the young male, torn between his love of art, and his father's plea for him to learn a more "practical" skill who cites this conflict as the cause for his acid reflux; the middle aged woman, whose suspicious husband doesn't completely understand his wife's need to grow, never mind the expense of tuition, which neither of them can afford; the couple, who only get to see each other at school since both of them are married but not to each other; a young male, talented painter and photographer, who wants to be "out" but is waiting for the right moment. Indeed, each student is different. And their response to the art on display will fall somewhere between the constraints, which are partially formed by Wild's (2011) selection of artwork, the timing of that selection, and the student's depth of knowledge of that art. But their spontaneous responses to those constraints are also possibly made up of their emotional and physical state, and things as yet undiscovered. Still, the art students were transformed in varying degrees by their experience in that gallery because Wild gave them the time and space to take it in, *to just be*, and honestly react. I would argue that this honest and more thorough transformation is pedagogically preferable to the performative model currently in fashion and criticized by Lyotard (1984), Cherryholmes (1988), Aoki (2005) and Pinar (1994, 2006), for example. It was wise of Wild to let her students view the art in the gallery without any preconceived

assignment. And it was wise of her to allow for their unanticipated responses, those little improvisations that can happen with the moment when allowed. For it is these improvisations that privilege the substance of a student's experience over the superficial tools of education, the instrumentalism exposed by Heidegger (1977) and criticized by Aoki (2005), which will perhaps create the possibility of a better education. Lastly, it was wise of her to allow the students to reflect on their experiences and for her to evaluate those reflections. Within all of this activity, planned and unplanned, lies the possibility of agency and by that I mean learning on the part of the student; and the careful nurturing and critiquing of an important body of knowledge by student and teacher. Barad's (2003) optimistic argument is attractive for many reasons but perhaps the two most compelling reasons are that it holds out the possibility of acquiring and contributing to knowledge that is an objective truth, albeit one that is local and intra-twined, rather than universal; and it suggests the possibility of agency, despite the proclamations of some who see agency as foreclosed. If understood and applied, this would vastly improve pedagogy, including the writing of standards, but more importantly, the process and products which are informed, but not determined, by these standards. Thus, within this ontological framework "standards" would be more fluid and required to evolve, since they would be informed by analyses of phenomena that are relational within local time and space. Indeed, Barad writes:

Matter plays an active, indeed agential, role in its iterative materialization, but this is not the only reason that the space of agency is much larger than that postulated in many other critical social theories. Intra-actions always entail particular exclusions, and exclusions foreclose any possibility of determinism, providing the

condition of an open future. Therefore, intra-actions are constraining but not determining. That is, intra-activity is neither a matter of strict determinism nor unconstrained freedom. The future is radically open at every turn. This open sense of futurity does not depend on the clash or collision of cultural demands; rather, it is inherent in the nature of intra-activity—even when apparatuses are primarily reinforcing, agency is not foreclosed (p. 826).

Barad's take on this "open sense of futurity" would seem to find agency in the most dire of circumstances, where art and hegemony live, Adorno (1978) (2002), Jay (1973), Benzer (2011). Good news indeed for our performative culture! Still, it makes more sense that an "open future" would be more assured if there were less of the constraining performativity currently in vogue: paradoxical scientific illiteracy, limited access to information, instrumentalism, managing teachers, managing students, and ultimately no time for the students and teacher to just be, in what Aoki (2005) poetically describes as, "...indwelling in the Zone of Between..." (p. 163).

I suggest that the previously mentioned "heterotopia," borrowed and adapted by art instructor Carol Wild (2011) from Foucault, is a good example of the "iterative materialization," which helps compose the "intra-actions" described by Barad, and that it allows for greater agency on the part of the students, since there are less educational constraints. Indeed, Wild (2011) was able to place a non-determining constraint on the experience of the art students through her selection of the art that was displayed similar to the constraint placed by a professor's well chosen book list: Clarity without rigidity. Importantly, by affording her students the opportunity to apply their experiences, skills, knowledge, (their gaze), in real time, in a defined but not defining space, and reflect on

them later (without the typical leading questions favored by instrumental pedagogy), she was better able to nudge her students to be more attentive to their moment(s) as they experienced it. To be sure there was no guarantee that what would follow from those moments would be nuggets of insight. Indeed, pedagogical exercises such as these always bring with them the element of risk. But where's the serious fun if there's no risk?

Without risk there can be no growth. Thus, by giving her students the opportunity to play in this very serious manner, they were forced to be attentive and open (or, as open as they could be given their "baggage"), and with that attentiveness and openness the chance to be creative and participate in the type of performativity favored by those who care about learning and adding to real knowledge: Performativity need not be limiting or controlling to the point where agency is forestalled and learning stopped. It can be an opportunity for the students to take part in a creative relationship with any subject, but for that to occur they must be immersed in the doing, instead of being treated like an empty vessel being filled with information that is already dead on arrival, immutable. Barad's (2003) take on agency seems to imply that it is always a possibility no matter what the educational environment. While I would agree that agency can and does occur in spite of bureaucratic heavy handedness and hegemonic forces, students and knowledge in general would be better off dwelling in an environment, like Wild's (2011) heterotopia or Brook's (2008) vibrant theatre. Ironically, Barad's (2003) argument should appeal to empiricists concerned with accountability and accurate measurement of the educational progress of students and schools in general. Indeed, given both the late physicist, Niels Bohr's (analyzed in Barad, 2003) and Barad's arguments, it appears that schools are making at least two mistakes when they assess student achievement and teacher performance with

standardized testing instruments: The first is in looking at the test instrument and the student as independent, objective, entities. The second mistake (related to the first) is in ignoring the influence of the test on the student and thus misinterpreting the results of that test. It is both sad and ironic that the very instruments chosen for measurement and accountability do neither. For educators the question is how Barad's theory of "agential realism" can change the day-to-day interaction between students, teachers, administrators, and the instruments used, and perhaps discarded, in evaluating the education students receive. And, it must be noted, that bureaucrats, who demand centralized control and participants, (teachers, students, administrators) used to their passive roles, would balk at her theory and consequent practice, since when applied it would demand more immediate and instant attention, and a willingness to critique and confront what they think to be true.

For Karen Barad (2003), Bohr's and Rouse's explication of the products, processes, and motivations behind science provided her with a novel way to discuss performativity that at least privileges materiality as much, if not more, as it privileges the impact of doing things with words. In contrast, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's, *Touching Feeling* (2003) implicitly dares us (a periperformative) to reinvestigate the power of words in her discussions of the performative and what she calls the "periperformative," words or phrases, she argues, which allude to performative speech acts, that because of their unique characteristics, have the ability to affect agency greater than a performative by itself. As an example, Sedgwick (2003) offers the well-known performative utterance, "I dare you!" and two common words spoken at the end of a marriage ceremony, "I do" (p. 70), and analyzes its impact. Sedgwick acknowledges the relative

strength of these performative speech acts to either maintain or challenge the status quo, yet she argues that the more nuanced periperformative responses such as, "...I won't take you up on it. Who are you to dare me? Who cares what you dare me to do?...tend to have a high threshold of initiative..." (p. 70). In other words, she argues that the periperformative has a greater ability to buck conventional thought. The thing that gives the periperformative this ability is its connection to a past and future to come, and its location in space. The periperformative, while acknowledging its connection to a past and future, occupies a "metaphorics of space" (p. 68), in other words, it is in the neighborhood of the performative. Additionally it is also grounded in history (the impetus behind Sedgwick's analysis is the crime of American slavery) and it is therefore because of this fascinating connection that the periperformative seems to have the ability to move about in a linear and *non-linear* fashion, thereby giving the periperformative a greater degree of agency. While her book is focused on literary analysis (Eliot, and Dickens for example), or political speech (Lincoln's Gettysburg Address) the implications for pedagogy are tremendous. Consider the following fictional exchange:

TEACHER: (Upset with the lack of effort of her students) I dare you to actually read tonight's entire assignment! Most of you seem to have the ability to do what's necessary to be successful in this class yet for some unknown reason, refuse to do the work! (Body language of the teacher suggests disgust/frustration)

STUDENT 1: (smart, yet seemingly lazy) I can't tonight, I've got a date with Halo III. (A popular video game. Some of the students laugh)

TEACHER: (Raises voice) Go ahead... make jokes! I don't care...I've already got degrees and a job. Enjoy your time as a greeter at Wal-Mart. Hey... some of you might want to practice this phrase...in fact everyone repeat after me, "You want fries with that?" (Most of the students are collectively rolling their eyes, others have tuned the teacher out)

STUDENT 2 (Usually quiet but now visibly angry) Why should we care what you dare us to do? Why don't you ever ask us what we want to do? (Some of the students are nodding their heads in approval)

TEACHER: (at her wits end) You know what... forget it. I'm done! I want everyone to take out their textbooks, turn to page 497 and read it until the end of the chapter. If you have time before the bell rings answer the questions at the end of the chapter. If not, it's for homework.

STUDENT 1 (Still in wise guy mode) You actually gonna grade it this time?

TEACHER: (angry) That's enough...get to work!

The teacher's performative of "I dare you..." might have been an improvised response, but it was one that had been used often enough so that any force that might have motivated the students to work harder had been diminished. Indeed, many improvisational responses are phrases frequently used and suggest a lack of novelty rather than a fresh approach to what is usually an ongoing problem. It would have taken an extraordinary improvisational response from the teacher to shift the mood of that class. In order to be effective, the teacher's improvisational response needed to include at least an acknowledgement of what, if any, they as a class had accomplished in addition to the time(s) that were wasted. In other words the teacher needed to admit something to the



students that they intuitively understood about the class, even if they were incapable of articulating their concerns. Instead, in this exchange, it was a student who suggested initiative, in the honest peripformative uttered by student 2, when she said, “Why should we care what you dare us to do? Why don’t you ever ask us what we want to do?” This student’s response to her teacher’s performative attempted to push the class in a different direction. It is also an example of serious play in that the student risked being disciplined as she openly confronted the teacher. Unfortunately, this teacher seemed more concerned with respect for her authority than she was with a way to genuinely motivate her students to work harder and interact with the material content of the class. Discipline had lost its more important meaning of to teach. Instead, recognition of authority appeared to be not only the means but also the end in our fictive, yet often repeated, exchange. Indeed, the teacher was continuing with a performative approach that privileges control from a central authority and a non-aporetic stance on the part of the students. Ironically, like “Chinese handcuffs” that tighten as one pulls harder to escape, the teacher’s performative of, “I dare you,” simply caused the students to retreat further into the space of disengagement and unfortunately contributed less to the lived world of teacher and student.

In our current performative culture, students who are grade conscious tend to do the assignment without questioning its importance or relevance. Ironically, the class that was briefly dramatized was better poised to further inquiry because they had an aporetic stance regarding what was put on their educational plate. Unfortunately, they chose to completely shut down and thus any gains they might have had as students, and any changes to the curriculum were forestalled. I would argue that neither the class of

“teacher pleasers” nor the class that refused to do their work is pedagogically desirable. Instead, I suggest that good teaching would include the following elements, however it is important to note that these suggestions do not constitute a method: spontaneous and reflective input from the students regarding their course of study (developmentally appropriate); second, an attentive teacher aware of the power or lack of power of various performatives and Sedgwick’s (2003) periperformatives; and lastly, time spent by students and teacher on “dwelling in the zone of between” (Aoki, 2005, p. 161).

Performatives and periperformatives work because of the context in which they are generated and received. I would argue that Sedgwick’s periperformative might be more effective because of its ability to seemingly play with time, in the sense that there is more to focus on than simply the thing that came before. To play with time is to reach back in the past, or anticipate a future as a response to a wholly demand from a present moment. To play with time is to change the tempo, which in turn, can change the tone of the response to a present demand: past, present and future to come, remain somewhat open, depending on the response of the participant. A performative of this nature is similar to Derrida’s idea of the performative writes scholar and lifelong friend of Derrida, J. Hillis Miller (2007, 2009). In his essay, *Performativity as Performance/Performativity as Speech Act: Derrida’s Special Theory of Performativity*, J. Hillis Miller (2007) takes issue with the variety of definitions surrounding what has become a somewhat large and contentious field of performativity studies. He argues, “... that it would be a catastrophe to blur different meanings of ‘performativity’...” (p. 220). And while the thrust of his essay is, not surprisingly, on the centrality of literary analysis as a way to end the confusion surrounding different versions of performativity, I would argue

that Miller's essay contains valuable insights for the student and teacher concerned with good teaching. Indeed, he promotes what he maintains is the most accurate version of performativity by discussing Derrida's take on George Eliot's *Daniel Deronda*. In this manner he is able to critique Austin and Butler's work on performativity, place Derrida as the intermediary between Austin and Butler, and critique those who misunderstand their work. His bone of contention with Butler is that she, "...invented a new and immensely influential theory called performativity, that is, the notion that gender is not inherent but is engendered by disciplinary pressures that coerce us into performing, that is, behaving, in a way society assumes is appropriate for a certain gender..." (p. 224). In other words, his criticism is on the privileging of social construct theory at the expense of the things that make us innately what we are, or what others term as materiality. Indeed, in a brief but I suspect sarcastic jab Miller writes, "Blessings on you Wikipedia and on you too, Judith Butler!..." (p. 224), as a way to demonstrate that one cannot do all things with just any words, since those blessings would have to be conferred upon them by a god that may or may not exist; or be inclined to bestow blessings. Of course, it might seem unfair to extrapolate a version of performativity that was designed for gender studies and adapt it for literary analysis. Miller seems less at odds with Austin. Clearly, Miller prefers Derrida's take on performativity as seen by Derrida's own analysis on Eliot's *Daniel Deronda*. For in both Derrida's and Miller's analysis of Eliot's novel is Miller's criticism of Austin's performativity and support for the Derridean version.

Regarding that novel Miller writes:

*Daniel Deronda* is a performance, or reading it is a performance, like performing a Mozart sonata, or, in this case, since the novel is long, complex and *echt*

Victorian like performing a Liszt piano concerto. *Daniel Deronda* is also an extended performative utterance of a peculiar kind. It generates a virtual literary reality that can be ‘accessed’ only by way of the performative efficacy of the words on the page as I read them. Those words call or conjure into existence, like specters in broad daylight, Gwendolen, Daniel, all the other characters, their ‘worlds,’ and all that they do and say (p. 235).

Miller seems to imply that the ability or lack of ability of a performative utterance to bring about a change that Derrida would liken to “...an absolute rupture between the present and the past...” (Miller, 2007, p. 231), and bring about a desired future yet to come hinges on the performance that serves as the context for that performative utterance. Indeed, it was the strength of Eliot’s novel that insured that her character Daniel could organically, yet surprisingly, follow the demand made of him by Mordecai. Without that context Mordecai’s demand would have fallen flat, much like the demand made by the ineffective teacher previously dramatized by me earlier in this chapter. Had that teacher created a different context (a series of classes as an extended performance) and then, uttered her performative, one that comes from an understanding of her students, we might have seen a better outcome. In other words, we might have seen the students respond to a demand, which came from a “wholly other,” with an educational leap instead of authoritarian derision.

Despite the lack of consensus regarding the different versions of performativity, what Miller (2007) praises in Derrida’s is seemingly what occurred in the previously mentioned “heterotopia” of Wild’s (2011) art gallery, and the theatre created by Brook (2008) as they both achieved success: One can view Wild’s (2011) sacred space of an art

gallery as a performance and the demand made on the students coming from the art on display in that gallery. The student's effective improvisational response to that demand (their serious play) was ensured by the strength of that performance (the carefully chosen art on display) yet in no way was it guaranteed. Similarly, it was the clarity without rigidity of Brooks' (2008) rehearsals (the performance) which allowed his actors to respond to his demand(s) (performative utterances) with an unexpected response which created that "rupture in time" that in turn ushered in his play yet to come but desired.

## Chapter 8

## CODA AS CURRICULUM

We dwell in tensionalities, and yet these tensionalities can go unnoticed or perhaps misunderstood. Or simply avoided if the tension seems too great and resolution out of reach. When this lack of attentiveness, misunderstanding, and avoidance comes to its inevitable conclusion, we see mediocre results: For example, take the jazz performer on, perhaps an off night. His turn to solo is fast approaching and yet his bandmate offers up a less than interesting combination of notes. What Edward Sarath (2013) calls a jazz referent. A referent can be made up of a “standard tune” or be “original.” Importantly, if it’s a good referent, what Sarath would call a, “highly malleable referent” (p. 192), it is because it contains ideas that are precise yet also ambiguous. But to return to my example of our musicians and their off night, a bad referent is offered to a fellow player who in turn responds with an uninteresting or perhaps clichéd response. In contrast, a “highly malleable referent” is put out there to be picked up and responded to by the attentive player. Instead of mediocrity we hear a purely spontaneous response that for Sarath (2013) is the result of a resolved tensionality between the self and the Self. For Sarath, the self is the individual self and the Self is what can, perhaps, best be described as the collective consciousness. And, there is dialectical tension between the self and the Self. Complicating matters even further is the tension within the self. In this case it is tension between the person who exists with the person to come, an Other if you will. Sarath (2013) argues that when all of these tensions are addressed and “resolved” the improvisational player moves beyond “ordinary consciousness” (p. 181) and achieves, “...an over-arching sense of an eternal present, where past and future connections are

subordinate...” (p. 181). Sarath is distinguishing improvisation as different from composition, even though he acknowledges that composition which is linear, for the most part, and improvisation, which is non-linear for the most part, both can create paths to the creation of something “transcendent” (p. 180). For Sarath (2013), what is important is,

The basic principal...that individual consciousness, or the personal self, is but a facet of collective consciousness, which is the transcendent Self, and therefore all human behavior manifests itself against, and is informed by, this transcendent collective backdrop. If the collective field is permeated by stress, tendencies toward outer stressful behavior are greater; if the field is more harmonious and coherent, so will be thinking and action (p. 402).

Indeed, Sarath who is a believer in meditation would be surprised, perhaps, at the ability of Chaplin, discussed in chapter 4, to overcome “outer stressful behavior” and create something so beautiful and spontaneous. The distinction between Sarath’s (2013) idea of the perfect improvisational situation with that of Seldes’ (1957) description of Chaplin’s response to a stressful referent brings up an important point: improvisational responses, the forces which provoke those responses, and the creativity contained within those responses, are unpredictable. Sarath might seem to prefer a cooperative “collective field” as the best environment for his “eternal present” and heightened consciousness. But if this is true, why then, have others been able to use constraint to improvise? To be sure improvisation is a skill that can be developed. It is therefore conceivable that, in my earlier discussion of performing improvisation in front of a crowd of drunken Shriners in chapter 4, had one or more members of our group had more talent, say approaching the level of Chaplin, we might have been able to elicit a different response to our

improvisations. On the other hand, it's possible that no amount of talent could have overcome the overweening distraction placed on the hundreds of Shriners by alcohol and the prostitutes in their laps. In effect, these drunkards dwelled not in the tensionality between our presentation and their collective consciousness, but rather their tensionality was dissolved in their complete absorption into alcohol and sex. While it's possible that these "Ignoramuses" and their "schoolmaster" might have arrived at a Rancièrian *approachment*, the "equality of intelligence" would at least have to wait until another time: A sober and non-sexual time. Indeed, this notion of environment and the action going on within that environment would appear to bolster the claims of Peter Brook (2008) discussed in chapter 6. Brook's rehearsals were similar to Sarath's "referent" in that in both the rehearsal space and the jazz referent the actor and performer, respectively, were given something precise and something ambiguous. The tensionality between the precise and ambiguous provoked the player to respond with something original, despite the fact that their response might have contained something already done before. Indeed, if we recall the Noguchi statue brought to our attention by Peter Appelbaum (2012) in chapter 3, it could be said of that statue that it contained precision and ambiguity. In this manner the statue serves as a potent referent albeit one that must be responded to by the attentive observer; not passive but provoked into thought of a playground to come. Similarly, as we saw in Miller's (2007) description of two characters in an Elliot novel, Mordecai and Daniel, that Mordecai's performative utterance, his demand on a "wholly other" was answered, and answered well because of the context of that performative utterance.



Context was crucial for the characters in my play in chapter 5. To be sure they were able to dwell in tensionality as they tried to eke out an education within the constraints of a dystopic future. Importantly, they were at their best when those constraints were not there. You may recall that when they were learning on their own in the abandoned warehouse in the scene entitled “woodshedding” (a term used by jazz musicians when they practice in order to increase their technical skills or “chops”) they had honest conversations regarding history. Ironically, even when they were in an actual prison (in contrast to the prison of school) the characters were able to engage in an authentic discussion, one in which improvisation was provoked and responded to authentically. But importantly, as I hoped I demonstrated in the previous chapters, these contexts, these environments, while important, vary: our Cuban improvisers who made up “Playback Theatre,” brought to our attention by the anthropologist Meer (2007), most certainly worked in an environment that encouraged self-censorship and yet they were able to improvise honestly. My original conclusion was that the difficulties of Cuban life predisposed them to improvisation. I still largely agree with that assessment, but I would like to leave room for another one that is connected to the first. Perhaps we can think of their life in Cuba as similar to the aforementioned jazz referent or the Noguchi statue. If this is true then it’s not their predisposition that was the determining factor in their ability to improvise. Instead, it was the Cuban people’s response to a request that was ambiguous and precise; a response made all the more potent because of their understanding of who they were, their self, and who they could be; that is to say the self that dwells within the self: In other words the self to come.

I found a similar dynamic in my discussion of Gil the “turntablist” brought to our attention by his extraordinary teacher Leif Gustavson (2008) in chapter 6. Importantly, Gustavson was able to take on William Ayer’s (2004) request to, “... become students of our students” (p. 66). As he and Gil turned their teacher s-student relationship into partnership, as allies they dwelled within a unique tensionality. This one pitted the pedagogy that organically grew out of Gil’s practice of sampling and spinning against the one they inherited. Indeed, what they inherited and what they were able to successfully fight against was the pedagogy which promotes a passive stance in contrast to the one that grew out of the very serious “play” of Gil and his associates and admirers. Fortunately, neither Gustavson nor Gil succumbed to a passive stance or what I termed earlier as a non-aporetic stance. It seems that Gustavson dwells in the space between what Aoki (2005) has described as the “... ambiguous, ambivalent space between this or that, between planned curriculum and live(d) curriculum ...” (p. 421-422). To be sure their live (d) curriculum was rich in the skills and ambiguous concepts that fill the work of historians, fiction writers with a good amount of mathematical and technical, or scientific, thinking. Indeed, what Gustavson found in Gil’s tremendous achievement is reading in its broadest sense. Perhaps the best description of this “art” comes from De Certeau (1984) who writes

Reading thus introduces an ‘art’ which is anything but passive. It resembles rather that art whose theory was developed by medieval poets and romancers: an innovation infiltrated into the text and even into the terms of a tradition.

Imbricated within the strategies of modernity ...the procedures of contemporary

consumption appear to constitute a subtle art of ‘renters’ who know how to insinuate their countless differences into the dominant text (p. xxii).

Gustavson found in Gil someone who was able, in the Certeauan (1984) sense, to “insinuate” his differences into the “dominant text.” Indeed, unlike Babbit or our white improvisers, whom Certeau reduces to a largely “silent majority” (p. 96) from the American comedy scene, Gil was able to overcome the marginality of a minority group as he reappropriated the constraining order of place and circumstance. Of course it remains to be seen whether or not his “insinuation” is enough to overcoming the stifling aspects of the pedagogical stance both he and Gustavson are trying to overcome. And it remains to be seen if those who learn from their example can overcome the problems of representation and *mimesis* which were suggested by Rancière (2009) and Appelbaum (2006, 2012, and 2013). Still, there is strength in what Gil, Gustavson, some of our jazz musicians, and some of our improvisational actors achieved. Indeed, they all were willing to dwell within a tensionality and engage with those tensionalities in such a way as to give them a space to notice and mold their nascent moment of creation, guided by a disciplined wandering, that has commanded my interest since the beginning of this study.

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